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MIKE SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

AUGUST
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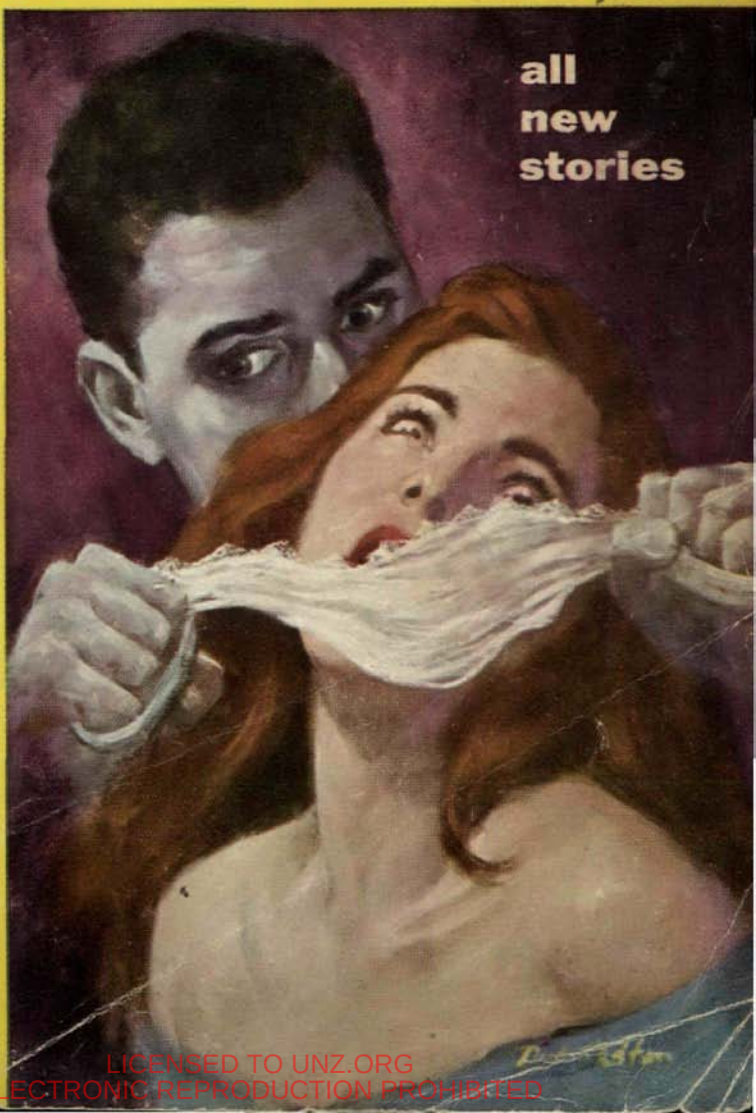
DEATH CREEPS SLOWLY
A New MIKE SHAYNE Novelet
By
RETT HALLIDAY

DEAD WRONG
a JOHNNY LIDDELL *Novelet*
By
FRANK KANE

THE FRIGHTENED LADY
A Jim Troy Thriller
By
THEODORE MATHIESON



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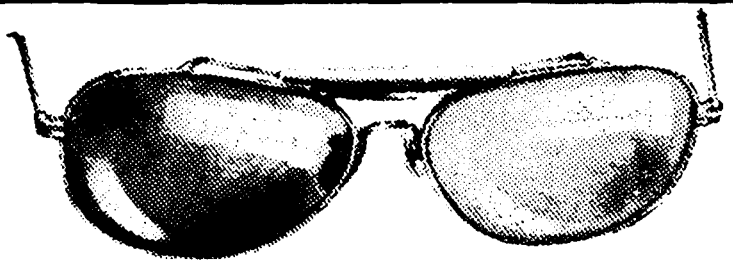

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MIKE SHAYNE
MYSTERY MAGAZINE

AUGUST, 1959 Vol. 5, No. 3

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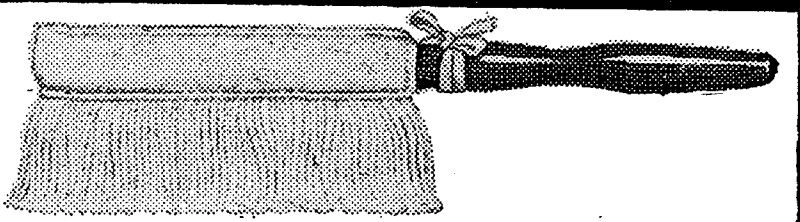

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DEATH CREEPS SLOWLY

A COMPLETE NEW MIKE SHAYNE NOVELET

by BRETT HALLIDAY

THE PAIR Lucy Hamilton ushered into Michael Shayne's office was a distinguished-looking couple. The man, about sixty years old, had glistening snow-white hair and a white, hairline mustache. He was solidly-built and his craggy face gave the impression that he was used to giving commands, and equally used to having them obeyed.

His companion was in her early fifties, with an erect, still slim and shapely figure. Graying hair was attractively arranged around a face whose lack of lines suggested she had the wisdom and means to patronize only luxury beauty shops.

They were both dressed in expensive but conservative clothes.

"Mr. Whitney and Miss Lake," Lucy announced.

Shayne nodded to the woman, shook hands with the man and indicated chairs. Lucy raised an eyebrow at him in silent inquiry as to whether he wanted her to stay and make notes. When Shayne shook his head, she withdrew and closed the door behind her.

Reseating himself behind his desk, the redheaded detective said, "I understand from our phone conversation that your son is missing, Mr. Whitney. I also believe you said you're down here from New York. Were the two of you vacationing here?"

"William's a Miami resident," Milford Whitney said in a formally precise tone. "He worked—

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Mike's case involved a blonde, a missing person and a very ugly racket. And there was, of course, a shake-down murder angle.

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works for the Lake Travel Agency, run by Miss Lake here. I flew down when Mabel phoned me he was missing."

"Mabel?" Shayne asked, glancing at the woman. "That you, Miss Lake?"

She nodded. "Milford and I are old friends. It was on his request that I gave Bill a job."

Shayne ran fingers through his coarse red nair. "What were the circumstances of the boy's disappearance?"

"He's hardly a boy," the woman said quickly. "He's past thirty."

Shayne looked at Whitney, who said, "Thirty-one last August. Mabel can tell you the details better than I. I was in New York when it happened."

The redhead looked back at Mabel Lake.

"There's not much to tell," she said. "Last Monday—not yesterday, but a week ago—Bill didn't show for work. When he failed to show Tuesday also, I phoned his apartment, but got no answer. Wednesday, when he missed a third day, I phoned again, then finally went over there. The building supervisor had no recollection of seeing him around since the previous Saturday night, when he caught a brief glimpse of him—leaving alone about seven-thirty. Then I called the police and reported him missing."

Shayne asked curiously, "You didn't try even a phone contact until Tuesday? Then waited another twenty-four hours before going to his apartment? Why?"

Mabel Lake flushed slightly. Avoiding Whitney's eyes, she said in a low voice, "He'd missed work without excuse before."

Milford Whitney said in a bitter tone, "I'm afraid my son isn't very dependable, Mr. Shayne. I tried him in a half dozen spots in my own company, and finally had to let him go. It got to be such a company joke that the boss's son couldn't handle *any* job, it was disrupting the whole organization. I asked Mabel to try him out because I thought getting him away from New York night clubs might work a change. But I guess it was wishful thinking. Miss Lake has been more than lenient with him."

"I see," Shayne said. He gave his left earlobe a thoughtful tug, and said to Mabel Lake, "If he was last seen on Saturday, actually four days elapsed before you reported it. Is that right?"

Mabel nodded. "Then I waited two more days before phoning Milford. I thought—"

When her voice trailed off, Whitney said glumly, "She thought he was probably just off on a drunk. Until the police told her what they found in his apartment."

"What was that?"

"A supply of heroin and what the police refer to as a rig," Whitney said with bitterness. "A syringe and spoon and alcohol lamp.

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Apparently my son is an addict, Mr. Shayne."

Shayne's shaggy eyebrows drew together in a frown. "What else did the police say?"

"Nothing. There isn't a single clue. They've been unable to find a single person who saw him after his building supervisor saw him leave his apartment ten days ago."

"Any of his friends or associates have theories?"

The woman said, "He doesn't seem to have any close associates, Mr. Shayne. The police turned up a night-club photographer he had a few dates with, but otherwise he seems to have spent his time alone."

Whitney said, "He's always been something of a loner. Maybe it's partly my fault for being too strict on the boy when he was young. I'm afraid it gave him an inferiority complex quite early in life. They say people don't turn to alcohol or drugs unless they feel inferior."

Shayne said, "Who's the night-club photographer?"

Mabel Lake frowned thoughtfully, finally shook her head. "I'm afraid I can't recall the name. I suppose you could get it from the police."

Shayne grunted, "Not much to go on. Why do you think I can find your son if the police can't, Mr. Whitney?"

"Maybe you can't," Whitney said wearily. "But they're not accomplishing anything. As nearly as I can gather, all they did was broadcast his description, then sit back and wait for someone to phone in. I understand that if you take a case, at least you work at it."

"Sure," the redhead said. "When there's something to work on. I'll look into it, if you like. But I can't guarantee results on the skimpy information you've given me."

"I'd appreciate it if you'd try anyway, Mr. Shayne." Whitney reached for his checkbook. "I'll give you a retainer."

"See my secretary on the way out," Shayne said. "She'll explain the rates and give you a receipt. Do you have a picture of your son?"

Drawing out his wallet, the man removed a three-by-five photograph. It was of a handsome but sullen appearing young man with even features and a deeply-cleft chin. After glancing at it, Shayne turned it over, wrote *William Whitney, age 31* on the back and glanced up.

"Description?" he asked.

"About five eleven, a hundred and eighty pounds, dark brown hair and brown eyes."

Shayne wrote down the information, then rose to indicate that the interview was ended. "Where may I reach you, Mr. Whitney?"

"I'm staying at the Statler," Whitney said, rising also.

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Mabel Lake said, "Do you want my address, Mr. Shayne?"

Shayne glanced at her. "I know where the Lake Travel Agency is. And I assume your home address is in the book. If I need you for anything, I'll get in touch, Miss Lake." He crossed the room to hold open the door.

Fifteen minutes after Milford Whitney and Mabel Lake left, Shayne was at Police Headquarters. He found Chief Will Gentry in his office.

Will Gentry was puffing a little too rapidly on a blunt cigar, with something less than a contented look on his beefy face. He raised his eyes from the papers he was poring over when Shayne entered, and his expression momentarily lightened. Then it became morose again and he said heavily, "Morning, Mike."

Dropping his lank frame into a chair, the redhead lit a cigarette. "How are you, Will. Troubles?"

"Always," the chief said, indicating the pile of papers before him. "Paperwork. Bah! We should save it for cops over eighty. What can I do for you?"

"I need a little information," Shayne said. "You won't have it at your fingertips. You'll probably have to pull the case record. It's just a routine M.P."

"On who?"

"A guy named William Whitney, missing about ten days."

Gentry looked at him curiously. "What makes you think it's just a routine missing persons?"

Shayne hiked shaggy eyebrows. "Isn't it?"

"It's an M.P., all right. But not routine. What's your interest?"

"His father hired me to find him. What's yours?"

Gentry said heavily, "Know what we found in his place?"

"Sure," Shayne said. "Some Horse and a rig. So he's a user. Since when have you taken over narcotics cases personally?"

The chief said, "Not just a user, Mike. Maybe he was, and maybe he wasn't. But mere users don't keep two hundred papers around."

Shayne emitted a low whistle. "How heavy were they?"

"Ten grains a pop. Cut ten to one with powdered milk as usual, of course, so the actual heroin content only amounted to two hundred grains in all. About six hundred dollars worth at the going retail price."

Shayne tugged at his left earlobe. "So he was a pusher, huh?" he said thoughtfully. "That changes things."

"It sure does," Gentry agreed. "If it was a voluntary disappearance, he wouldn't have left the junk behind. That would have been asking for it. We think he's dead."

After considering a moment, Shayne reluctantly nodded. "You could be right, Will. If it was a

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gang payoff for some kind of double-cross, he's probably wearing concrete overshoes on the bottom of the bay. Got anything at all on it?"

Gentry shook his head. "Not even an indirect lead. The guy didn't seem to have any friends."

"His employer mentioned some night-club photographer," Shayne said. "A girl."

Gentry snorted. "Yeah. A girl named Rose Henderson over at the Club Swallow. We talked to her. Says she had three dates with him, and knows nothing about him—beyond the color of his eyes."

Punching out his cigarette, Shayne rose. "Well, thanks for nothing, Will." He tugged at his earlobe again. "Why do you suppose a guy like that would go in for pushing?"

"How do you mean, a guy like that?"

"His father seems to be loaded. Owns his own company in New York. He couldn't have needed the dough."

"It wouldn't be the first rich man's kid in the business, Mike. Maybe his dad wanted explanations when he tried asking for too much. And it's an expensive habit."

"Yeah," Shayne said slowly. "Which probably means he was a user too. It's a standard way to pay the toll."

As he turned toward the door, Gentry said, "Bet you don't find him before we do, Mike."

From the doorway the redhead threw him back a sour grin. "Bet you don't find him before I do either, Will. Bet neither one of us ever finds him."

He pulled the door closed behind him from outside.

II

THE SUPERVISOR of the building where William Whitney rented an apartment was a lank, elderly man with a perpetually sad expression. He told Shayne his name was Melvin Cling. Shayne asked him if Whitney had many visitors and if he could describe the people he'd seen coming and going.

The old man shook his head. "Never had a single caller that I saw. Funny, too, after what the cops found in his place. Feller was peddling dope, you know."

"Yeah, I heard."

"You'd think customers would have been coming in and out at all hours. But I never saw nobody call. He must have peddled all of the stuff on the outside."

Shayne said, "How about a look at his apartment?"

When Melvin Cling looked dubious, the redhead pulled a bill from his wallet and held it out. The dubious expression disappeared. So did the bill.

"Rent's paid till the end of the

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month," the supervisor said. "I can't move his stuff out till then. But since the cops don't think he'll be back, no reason I can't show the place to prospective tenants."

He let the detective into Whitney's apartment with a pass key and followed close on Shayne's heels as the redhead moved from room to room. There were three rooms and a bath. The sole circumstance of interest Shayne noted was a purely negative one. There was no sign of hurried departure, and no indication that Whitney had packed any clothing. Even his shaving equipment and toothbrush were still in the bathroom.

"Sure looks like he meant to come back, don't it?" the building supervisor commented.

"Yeah," Shayne grunted.

All the evidence corroborated Will Gentry's theory that it hadn't been a voluntary disappearance.

When Shayne left the apartment building, he returned to his Flagler Street office. His only lead, the nightclub photographer at the Club Swallow, wouldn't be at work until evening, so there was nothing more he could do at the moment. He spent the rest of the day dictating a few letters, at five went home for a shower and change of clothes, and arrived at the Club Swallow a few minutes after seven.

Club Swallow was a run-of-the-mill supper club and night club, neither exclusive nor a dive. The prices were average, and so were the food and entertaintment.

A pert little brunette behind the checkroom counter looked over Shayne's rangy frame with interest when he handed her his hat. "Aren't you Michael Shayne, the detective?" she asked.

"Uh-huh," Shayne said.

"I'm Pauline Frazier. You got my boy friend out of a jam once. Only he wasn't my boy friend then."

"Oh?" Shayne said. "Who was that?"

"Bob Withers."

Shayne furrowed his brow.

"He was up on an armed-robbery charge," she prompted him. "You found the fellow who really did it."

"Yes, I remember now," the redhead said. "About three years back. How's Bob doing?"

"Wonderfully. He's got his own filling station now, you know. As soon as he finishes paying off the mortgage, we're going to be married."

Shayne smiled at her. "Wish you happiness, Pauline. Give Bob my regards."

Pocketing his check, he moved on into the dining room. A handsome, black-haired headwaiter with a thin black mustache moved forward and gave him a deferential bow. "Alone, sir?" he inquired.

Then, as the detective nodded, the headwaiter's eyes momentar-

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ily narrowed. "Aren't you Michael Shayne?" he asked.

"Yeah," Shayne said with a frown.

It was not unusual for strangers to recognize him but he was surprised and startled by the headwaiter's reaction. The man's tone was definitely wary, even hostile. Sometimes the detective encountered wariness in people he knew, particularly when he ran into some underworld character he'd clashed with in the past. But strangers usually exhibited friendly interest when they met him, and sometimes acted downright thrilled. Shayne was sure he'd never seen this man before. But he was equally sure the headwaiter was upset by his appearance.

The man led him to a table against the wall, snapped his fingers at a waiter and disappeared. When the waiter came over, the redhead ordered dinner and told him to bring a double cognac with ice water behind it first.

While sipping his drink, Shayne looked around for Rose Henderson. He spotted her across the room taking a picture of a table of two couples. She was a well-formed blonde in her late twenties, he noted, with regular features and a pleasant smile. She wore an off-the-shoulder evening gown which exposed smoothly-rounded shoulders and a flawless back.

He made no attempt to catch the young lady's eye, knowing she would get to him eventually. He had finished dinner and was smoking a cigarette over coffee when she finally did.

"Like a photograph, sir?" she asked with a smile, but in a tone suggesting she would be surprised if he replied in the affirmative. Men dining alone aren't usually interested in being photographed in night clubs.

"Maybe," Shayne said. "Depends."

"On what, sir?"

"On whether you'll sit down and have a drink with me afterward."

She looked him over estimatingly and decided she approved. Then she glanced over the house. "I've covered most of the diners here now," she said. "I guess I can afford a break."

Raising the camera, she said, "Smile pretty now."

Shayne obediently smiled and a flash bulb exploded.

"Be right back," she said. "Soon as I put some films to soak."

Crossing the room, she disappeared through a door at the rear. Shayne signaled for his waiter, ordered more cognac and told him also to bring whatever Miss Henderson customarily drank. When she returned five minutes later, the drinks were already on the table.

As Shayne held a chair for her, she said in a pleased tone, "How'd

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you know I drink rum and coke?"

"It isn't very complicated," he said dryly as he reseated himself. "I just asked the waiter to bring your usual drink."

"Oh," she said with mock disappointment. "I hoped you'd gone to a great deal of trouble to learn my tastes. I thought maybe you were a secret admirer."

"Just an admirer. There's nothing secret about it."

"Um, I like gallant men," she said. She raised her glass. "I'm Rose Henderson."

"Mike Shayne," the redhead said, raising his own glass.

Her glass remained suspended and she looked surprised. "The private detective?"

"Uh-huh."

The glass traveled the rest of the distance to her lips and she drank deeply. When she set it down again she asked half-mockingly, "Was it my beauty and charm that made you invite me to have a drink? Or am I a suspect in some case you're investigating?"

"Some of both," he said easily. "Your beauty and charm would have made me invite you even if I'd come in just for pleasure. But actually I was looking for you."

"Oh? What crime have I committed?"

"None that I know of. William Whitney's father has engaged me to find him."

Her smile faded. In a wary tone she said, "I told the police all I know about him. I only had a few dates with him."

A figure suddenly loomed next to the table. Glancing up, Shayne saw it was the headwaiter. He was glowering down at Rose Henderson.

In a stiff voice the man said, "You're not supposed to sit with customers, Rose."

The girl looked up at him in astonishment. "Since when, Charlie?"

"Since right now."

Elevating her nose, the blonde said, "Don't you order me around, Charlie Velk. I'm not one of your waiters. I work for Hank Goodrich, not you."

The headwaiter started to reach for her wrist, but abruptly halted the movement when Shayne stared at him in an ominously intent way and edged slightly forward in his chair.

Dropping his hand to his side, Velk looked down at Shayne for an instant with an expression of controlled rage. Then he did a curt about-face and walked away.

"What's his trouble?" the redhead inquired. "Jealousy?"

"He always fusses when I sit with a customer," Rose said with indifference. "Though this is the first time he hasn't waited until afterward. He must think that you're heavier competition than usual."

"He your boy friend?"

She smiled complacently. "He'd

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like to be. But I'm not on a leash to anyone."

In a casual tone Shayne asked, "Was he jealous of Bill Whitney?"

She gave him a quick glance. "Of course not. Bill and I weren't serious."

"Neither are you and I," the detective pointed out. "But he tried to break us up."

She looked a little uncomfortable. "I think I'd better leave now. Some new people have come in." She started to rise. "I'll bring your picture over in a few minutes."

Shayne rose also. "How late do you work?"

"Just till midnight. Another girl takes over then."

"May I stop back and buy you a drink somewhere else?"

She gave him a contemplative look. "You won't find out anything about Bill from me. I don't know anything."

"I'm not all business," Shayne told her. "Maybe I just want to buy you a drink."

She studied him again. "All right," she said.

She moved away and Shayne watched the smooth movement of her hips as she disappeared through the door she had used before. In a few moments she reappeared with a stack of photographs and began going from table to table, handing them out and receiving money in return.

When she reached Shayne's table, she smiled a little distantly and said, "One fifty please, sir."

Shayne paid, glanced at the picture and thrust it into a pocket. As the girl moved away again, he saw headwaiter Charlie Velk stop her and say something in a heated tone. Rose tossed her head and walked away from him.

Shayne called for his check, paid the bill and left.

III

EXACTLY AT MIDNIGHT Shayne entered Club Swallow again. As he passed the hatcheck counter he winked at the brunette Pauline and said, "I'll keep my hat this time. I'm not staying."

The headwaiter met him at the entrance to the club proper. He gave Shayne a cold smile. "Miss Henderson left a message for you," he said. "She wasn't feeling well, so she went home early."

"Oh?" Shayne said with a frown. Glancing about the club, he saw that an evening-gowned redhead not nearly as attractive as Rose was now moving from table to table with a camera. "Where's home?"

"We can't pass out such information about club employees," Velk said with evident enjoyment. "And you won't find it in the book. She has an unlisted number."

Shayne studied the man's handsome chin moodily. He growled,

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"With your personality, it's a wonder the patrons don't get indignant just as a matter of course."

Turning on his heel, Shayne stalked away.

As he started to pass the checkroom counter, he paused, then changed direction and went over to it. Glancing toward the clubroom entrance, he saw that Velk had disappeared.

"You know Rose Henderson, Pauline?" Shayne asked.

"The photographer? Sure, Mr. Shayne."

"What time did she leave tonight?"

"Leave?" the girl said. "She hasn't yet."

"You sure?" he asked sharply.

"Certain. She always calls goodnight as she goes past."

Shayne tugged at his left earlobe. "Any back exit?"

"Yes, but Rose never uses it. She always goes out the front way."

Thanking the girl, Shayne returned to the archway into the main room. The midnight floorshow was just starting and the house lights had dimmed. Charlie Velk was nowhere in sight.

The redhead circled the room to the door he had seen Rose enter earlier. It led to a hallway at the rear of the club. On one side of the hall there was a door labeled: *Dark Room—Keep Out.* Across from it another door with a red sign over it reading: *Exit.*

Shayne pulled open the dark room door, glanced in and saw it was empty. Then he opened the door marked: *Manager.*

Three people were in the room. A large, heavy-shouldered man with sleek blond hair sat behind a desk. Rose Henderson sat sullenly in a chair before the desk, her lips tightly compressed. Charlie Velk leaned against a wall. The big man, whom Shayne assumed was the club manager, Hank Goodrich, whom Rose had mentioned, was emphasizing his points by pounding a clenched fist on the desk top.

As the redhead stepped inside, the big man was saying, "Are you out of your head, Rose? Suppose this shamus starts making trouble for us. Suppose he—" He broke off when he saw Shayne and scowled up at the detective.

Hooking his hat onto the hook of a clothes-tree next to the door, Shayne said to the headwaiter, "You tell lies, don't you, Charlie?" He gave Rose a chummy smile. "Charlie said you'd gone home sick."

The blonde looked nervous and upset. She said weakly, "Something came up, Mike. Maybe we'd better make it another time."

Shayne said, "You wouldn't stand me up, would you, Rose? Let's get going."

Charlie Velk took a step toward Shayne. "You heard her, Shayne. On your way."

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Shayne gave the man a curious glance, moved forward and drew Rose to her feet by one hand. Velk's expression grew enraged. He swung a fast right at Shayne's head.

Shayne moved his head two inches to one side and Velk's fist whistled past it. Releasing Rose's hand, the detective drove a hard right into the headwaiter's stomach. As Velk bent double with a grunt, Shayne landed a left hook on his jaw. The man went over backward, rolled into a corner and lay still.

Meantime the nightclub manager had come out of his chair. He started to move toward Shayne and then seemed to think better of it.

Shayne shrugged and lifted his hat from the clothes-tree. Taking Rose's elbow, he steered her out into the hall.

He could feel the girl's arm tremble under his touch. She said fearfully, "Hank's going to be mad."

"At you?" he asked. "Why? You didn't clobber his headwaiter."

She continued to tremble all the way down the hall to the rear exit and across the parking lot to Shayne's car. When they were both seated in the car, Shayne offered her a cigarette. He noted that it shook in her lips when he held a light for her.

Lighting his own, he said, "Why so nervous? Afraid you'll lose your job?"

"Not that," she said in a low voice. "Hank won't fire me. But I'm in for another bawling out."

"What's his objection to your going out with me?"

"He wasn't objecting to that," she said quickly. "It was something else he was sore about."

Shayne was sure the nightclub manager had been ordering her not to go out with him, but he didn't press the point. "Where'd you like to go?" he asked.

"Home, I think. I don't feel up to another nightclub. We can have a drink at my place."

All right," Shayne said. "But you'd better tell me the address."

She had an apartment on the east side. It was a comfortably-furnished, three-room place with a large living room. By the time they reached it, the girl's nervousness seemed to have increased instead of abating.

"Why so scared?" Shayne asked her. "You're safe here."

"I'll be all right," she said. "Fix a drink while I get into something comfortable."

Pointing to a sideboard containing bottles and glasses, she went into the bedroom and closed the door.

There was an assortment of liquors on the sideboard, including some brandy, Shayne was pleased to discover. Going into the kitchen, he got some ice cubes from the

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refrigerator and made a tall glass of ice water. Noticing Coca Cola in the refrigerator, he made Rose a rum and coke. He poured himself a double shot of brandy and set the drinks on a low cocktail table before the sofa. Then he sat on the sofa and waited.

A full twenty minutes passed before the girl finally emerged from the bedroom. She was wearing a white terry-cloth housecoat and bedroom slippers. Her nervousness had disappeared and she acted almost gay. Crossing to the sofa, she sat down close to Shayne, picked up her drink and drained it in one continuous gulp.

Suddenly, quite by accident, the terry cloth parted a little, just above her right knee. Shayne's eyes widened. Abruptly jerking the housecoat wide open, he leaned forward and glanced down. She drew her knees together and clutched the housecoat closed again, but not quite quickly enough.

She stared at him as he released his grip on the edge of the garment, leaned back and said in a dry tone, "You've got quite a few needle scars on the inner parts of your thighs, Rose. And your pupils are like pinpoints. You just had a pop in the bedroom, didn't you?"

She made no reply, just continued to stare at him.

"How bad are you hooked?" he asked roughly.

"I'm not hooked," she said quickly. "I just play with it a little for laughs. I could kick it any time."

"Sure you could," Shayne said sarcastically. "If they put you in a strait-jacket. Who got you on the junk? Bill Whitney?"

She looked startled. "What makes you ask that?"

"He was a pusher, wasn't he?" the redhead shot at her.

She shook her head slowly. "Where'd you get that idea?"

"Two hundred papers of heroin were found in his apartment," Shayne said. "Don't try to tell me he wasn't involved in the racket."

The news didn't seem to surprise her. She said almost defensively, "He was just a leg man. He never in his life got anybody hooked. In fact, he was trying to help me get off the stuff."

"So you're hooked bad enough to need help," Shayne pounced. "What was Whitney's interest?"

In a low voice she said, "He—he wanted to marry me. I don't think it was love. I think it was just desperation."

"How do you mean?"

"He was hooked too," she said miserably. "That's how he got involved in delivering the stuff to retailers. It was the only way he could pay the toll. He thought if we fought it together, maybe we could help each other kick it."

"What did you think?"

"I was all for the mutual-help

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idea. I said we'd table marriage talk until we were both straightened out. We tried gradual withdrawal, but it was too tough. Bill gave up. He was going to turn himself in for a forced cure."

"Turn himself in where?" Shayne asked sharply.

"To the cops. He figured that in jail he'd have to kick it."

"He meant to blow the whistle on his boss?" the redhead asked.

"I guess," she said reluctantly.

Shayne said, "No wonder he disappeared. His boss know he was yelling cop?"

"I don't know. I don't know who he worked for. All I know is he was the leg man who delivered the stuff to—"

When she stopped abruptly, Shayne said, "To the club? That where you get your supply?"

She looked at him in fright, then gave a hopeless shrug. "The club is a retail outlet. Charlie Velk is the guy who started me on the junk. That's how I met Bill. He came in every Wednesday night to make a delivery."

Shayne asked, "That why Goodrich and Velk didn't want you to see me? They were afraid Bill Whitney's trail would lead to them?"

She nodded. "You can't blame them. I'm sure they don't know what happened to him. But your prying around might turn up the fact that they're pushers."

The redhead mused for a moment, then asked. "Who brings the stuff in since Whitney disappeared?"

"I don't know his name. He's only been in once. Last Wednesday night. I didn't even know Bill was missing then."

"What's he look like?"

"He's tall and thin. Black hair and deep-set eyes. About thirty-five."

"What time does he get there?"

"About ten last Wednesday. Bill always came in about then, too."

"What door does he use? Front or back?"

"Bill always came in the back way, then remained in the club for a while and left by the front door. The new man used the back door both times. I just happened to see him because I was coming out of the dark room."

Rising from the sofa, Shayne picked up his hat. The girl looked up at him.

"You're leaving?" she asked, her face strained and almost bloodless.

He merely nodded, but there was sympathy in his eyes.

Walking to the door, he pulled it open, looked back at her once and walked out. She was not looking at the door. She was seated with her hands in her lap, sightlessly staring ahead of her.

There was more than just dejection in her attitude. There was fear.

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IV

THE NEXT NIGHT, Wednesday, Shayne was parked in the lot behind Club Swallow at nine o'clock. He placed his car in the lane nearest the building, only a dozen feet from the back door.

Between nine and ten P.M. a large number of cars moved in and out of the lot, but no one at all used the back door. At five minutes past ten a gray Dodge sedan pulled into the lot and parked two lanes away from Shayne. The occupant passed right in front of the detective's car as he went to the back door and opened it. He was a tall, thin man with deep-set eyes, exactly fitting Rose Henderson's description of the new leg man.

The man was inside barely ten minutes. When he came out again, Shayne waited until his car drove to the lot exit. Then he followed without lights as far as the street. Finally he switched on his lights and trailed the Dodge from a distance of a half block.

By midnight the thin man had made five more stops. The detective mentally filed each address for later turning over to Will Gentry as heroin outlets. After the last stop, the man drove to an apartment house, parked his car in a lot adjacent and went inside.

Shayne watched the front of the building, and in a few moments saw lights go on in a second-floor apartment. A moment later the thin man appeared at a window and drew the shade.

Entering the building, the redhead quietly ascended to the second floor and located the proper door. He merely glanced at it to see its number, which was 2-C, then went down the stairs again. According to a card on the lobby mailbox for 2-C, the apartment was occupied by a Marshall Tarbox.

Fifteen minutes later the redhead was at Police Headquarters. He had the name run through Criminal Records, but there was nothing on the man.

Shayne gave up for the night and went home to bed.

At seven the next morning the detective was parked across the street from Marshall Tarbox's apartment building. Noting that the gray Dodge was still on the lot, he settled back to wait.

It was a long wait. The thin man didn't come from the building until eight thirty. Climbing into the Dodge, he headed toward the downtown district with Shayne again trailing at a half-block interval. Near the center of town Shayne parked on the street when the Dodge turned into a public parking lot. The redhead followed on foot from there.

Marshall Tarbox turned into the front entrance of a small office with a plate-glass front window. There was some gilt lettering on the glass, but Shayne was a

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quarter block back, and couldn't make out what it said. He got a mild shock when twenty long strides brought him close enough to read it.

The lettering read: LAKE TRAVEL AGENCY.

Bemused, the detective watched through the plate-glass window as the thin man pushed through a wooden gate, hung his hat on a wall hook and took up a position behind a counter marked: *Information.*

It struck Shayne as far too much of a coincidence for Bill Whitney's replacement to be a fellow employee of the same firm. The only sensible explanation was that it *wasn't* coincidence.

Which meant, at the very least, that the Lake Travel Agency had some kind of connection with narcotics. And at the very most—might be the "front"—concealed headquarters of the whole narcotics ring. And that in turn led to interesting speculations about Miss Mabel Lake.

He was contemplating this development when a pleased feminine voice said in his ear, "Why, Mr. Shane! How nice to see you."

Turning, Shayne saw that Mabel Lake had come up beside him. She was dressed in a tailored suit that gave her figure the appearance of a much younger woman. In the bright sunlight her face wasn't quite as unlined as it had seemed in the more subdued light of his office, but it still struck the detective that she was more attractive than any woman her age had a right to be.

Shayne said, "Good morning, Miss Lake."

"You were looking for me?" she asked in the same pleased voice. "We don't open till nine, but come in anyway."

He made no attempt to conceal his admiration as he said easily, "Just happened to be passing and noticed the sign on the window."

She looked disappointed. "Oh. Have you learned anything about Bill yet?"

"Not much. Except that—well, he wasn't just a user. He was involved in something more serious—the narcotic traffic."

He watched her expression closely, but she exhibited nothing but shock. "Really?" she said. "How awful. Does Milford know?"

Shayne shook his head. "I haven't made a report to him yet." He paused, then said deliberately, "Bill was going to turn himself in to the police. It's quite possible his associates found it out and killed him to shut him up."

Her eyes widened in astonishment. Or what could have been simulated astonishment, Shayne told himself cautiously. "How terrible. To think he worked right in the agency, and I never suspected he was also working for gangsters. How did you learn all this?"

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"By digging," Shayne said vaguely. "It's a long story."

"Why don't you come into my office and tell me about it?" she suggested.

He shook his head. "Haven't time right now." After a thoughtful pause, he added, "Some evening would be better."

He put nothing in his tone to suggest he meant such an evening might develop into more than a friendly talk, but he didn't have to. She was miles ahead of him.

"I'm free tonight," she said instantly.

He pretended to reflect. "It would have to be late," he said finally. "I'm tied up early in the evening."

"That doesn't matter," she said eagerly. "Any time is all right."

"It might be after midnight," he said.

Instead of looking disappointed, she looked even more eager. Her eagerness might have amused Shayne if it hadn't been so pathetic. He wondered how long it had been since she had last been able to lure some younger man into calling at a very late hour. If he hadn't wanted to see the inside of her house, he would have ended the farce right there.

"You haven't told me the address," he said.

"How silly of me," she said in a flustered voice. Fumbling in her purse, she produced a small card and a fountain pen. Quickly she wrote on the card and handed it to him.

Then she did a surprising thing—something he had hardly dared to suggest or hope for. She pressed a key into his hand. "You can return this to me when you call. Sometimes—well, I just don't hear the doorbell. I've been intending to have an electrician look at it. I keep another key, you see, hidden under the door mat, but you may as well take this one. I'll use the other."

V

MABEL LAKE had a one-story house on the outskirts of the city. It was set well back from the road and was surrounded by fifty feet of lawn on all sides. As the houses either side of it had similar broad lawns, it was a full hundred feet from the next nearest house.

Shayne pulled right into the driveway and through the open doors of the double garage. Getting out of the car, he glanced at the houses on either side, when he saw no one, pulled one of the sliding doors of the garage shut to conceal his car.

As he long-legged it toward the rear door of the house, the redhead reflected with amusement that he was over fourteen hours early for his midnight date. It was only nine thirty A.M.

Even though Mabel had said she lived alone and had no servants,

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Shayne took the precaution of knocking on the back door. When there was no answer, he unlocked it with the key she had given him, stepped into the kitchen and locked it behind him.

There were five rooms in the house, all on one floor: a kitchen, dining-room, front room, bedroom and study. Starting with the study, he methodically searched each room.

The only thing of interest he found was a half dozen pornographic books beneath some lingerie in the bottom drawer of a dresser in the bedroom. He flipped through them rapidly, made a face and replaced them where he had found them.

Starting over in the study, he removed every desk drawer and examined it for false bottoms. None had any, but as he started to replace them, he noticed that the upper drawers on each side were about eight inches shorter than their lower companions. Groping into the righthand cavity, he felt another knob. When he pulled out the small inner drawer, there was nothing in it but a coffee can.

Prying off the lid, he examined the white powder in the can, pinched a bit between forefinger and thumb and cautiously touched his tongue to it. He grimaced at the bitter taste, brushed off his fingers and touched a handkerchief to the tip of his tongue. It was pure heroin.

Hefting the can, Shayne estimated that there was somewhat less than a pound of the fluffy white powder, as it would weigh less by volume than the can's original coffee contents. Possibly about twelve ounces, he judged. He did some mental arithmetic and worked out the answer that, cut ten to one with powdered milk, more than five thousand individual fixes could be packaged up from the can's contents—with a retail take of over fifteen thousand dollars, if Will Gentry's quote of the going price as three dollars a pop was right.

He pressed the lid back on the can, replaced it in the secret drawer, shoved the drawer home and pushed the outer drawer in after it.

Then he turned to the secret drawer on the left.

This proved to contain some things as interesting as the other. There were three small notebooks in it, and it took only cursory examination to decide they were the records of the narcotics ring. Having glanced through them once, Shayne went back over each for a more detailed study.

One was simply a list of names, dates and amounts. Most of the names were Spanish, and none were familiar to the detective. From the size of the amounts, Shayne deduced that this was the record of payments for bulk heroin smuggled into the country.

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The Spanish origin of the recipient's names bore this out, as most illegal narcotics would come by water from South American countries.

There was a regular recurrence of each name, indicating that it was a large, organized ring, and not merely a one-shot arrangement of tourists trying to pick up a few easy bucks. The last amount entered, two thousand dollars, was only a few days back, and Shayne guessed that it represented payment for the shipment he had just examined.

He was frowning heavily now. There was a large margin of profit in the racket, he thought grimly, as it would retail after cutting for seven to eight times that.

The second book was apparently an account of deliveries to retailers. Each page was headed by a name, and the space below was filled with a series of dates followed by numbers. It wasn't hard to deduce that the numbers represented the number of individual papers of cut heroin delivered on each date.

One of the pages was headed by the name Hank Goodrich, the detective noted.

The third book was simply a ledger. Apparently Mabel Lake was a methodical businesswoman, for she had carefully entered expenses and receipts for all transactions. The account went back four years, and the annual take was staggering.

Shayne dropped the three notebooks into a side pocket of his coat. He had left the heroin where he found it so that it could be seized on the premises by the narcotics boys when they acted on his tip and raided the house. If he had carried it away to deliver to the police, it would simply be his word against Mabel Lake's that it had ever been in the house. But the written records were different. They would be incriminating evidence no matter where they were found.

Glancing at his watch, the redhead saw that he had been in the house over two and a half hours. It was just past noon. While it was unlikely that Mabel Lake made a habit of coming home for lunch from all the way downtown, he decided it was time to leave.

He reached the doorway between the dining room and the kitchen when the back doorknob rattled. He halted in the doorway and his eyes narrowed when he saw the outline of a figure through the curtain hanging in front of the back door's glass pane. The curtain was too thick to make out whether it was a man or woman.

Shayne faded back through the dining room toward the front room, with the intention of easing himself out the front door. He reached the doorway between the

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two rooms just as the front door slammed open.

Mabel Lake, followed by the thin Marshall Tarbox, stepped inside. The woman had a small, nickle-plated automatic in her hand. The man carried a business-like forty-five caliber automatic.

Tarbox pushed the door shut behind him without taking his gun off Shayne. Mabel's was centered unerringly on his belt buckle too, and her expression was one of barely controlled rage. Shayne slowly raised his hands to shoulder height.

"Let the others in the back door," the woman snapped at her companion. "I can manage this —" She stopped because she couldn't think of an epithet strong enough.

With his gun Tarbox waved Shayne out of the doorway and to one side of the room. Then, with a final look at Mabel to make sure she had the situation under control, he moved through the dining room into the kitchen. They could hear him unlocking the back door.

Mabel hissed at Shayne, "Just try something, lover boy. Give me an excuse to pull the trigger."

The redhead gave her a deliberately infuriating smile. "Upset because I arrived early?" he asked.

Her face turned dead white with rage. "You thought you were clever," she spat at him. "You think I didn't know what you were planning to do? I gave you the key and pretended to go along just to catch you in the act."

Marshall Tarbox came back into the room trailed by Hank Goodrich and Charlie Velk.

Shayne said to Mabel in a sarcastic voice, "Sure you did." Then he cocked an eye at Hank Goodrich. "Let me guess," he said. "You got out of Rose what we talked about, and phoned Mabel that I probably tailed Tarbox from your joint last night. She put two-and-two together and decided it wasn't her charm that got me interested in her house."

The nightclub manager growled, "It was a cinch, Shayne. We just locked Rose up last night until she got the shakes, then held a needle under her nose as a bribe to talk. She came across like a little lamb."

"Shut up!" Mabel screamed at Goodrich, nearly as enraged at the blond man for letting Shayne know she'd been originally taken in as she was at the detective.

Goodrich stared at her. In a cold voice he said, "Don't order me around, sister. I'm a customer, not an employee."

Mabel glared back at him, finally controlled herself with obvious effort.

Charlie Velk said, "What are we going to do with this shamus?"

"Kill him," Mabel said viciously. "He knows too much."

"How do you know?" Good-

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rich objected. "I'm not taking a murder rap just because you're sore at the guy. What've you got out here he could find anyway? You didn't make it very clear on the phone."

The woman said, "Even if he didn't find anything, he knows enough to put the police on our trail. We can't risk even suspicion."

Velk suggested reasonably, "Why don't you check whatever you've got hidden here, Mabel, and see if it's still there?"

The woman glanced at him, then curtly ordered, "Keep Shayne covered," and turned to enter the study door. They could hear the key turn from inside.

Shayne said, "Mind if I put my arms down? I'm not armed."

"Keep 'em up," Tarbox snapped.

Shrugging, the redhead kept them elevated to shoulder height.

Moments passed in silence before the study door opened again and Mabel came out. Pointing her little nickle-plated automatic at Shayne, she said in a deadly whisper, "Turn around and put your hands against the wall."

The redhead obeyed slowly. When he was in position, Mabel ordered, "Shake him down."

Charlie Velk moved in behind Shayne, gave him a thorough shakedown and removed the three small notebooks from his pocket.

Mabel snapped, "Give me those!" and moved forward to jerk them from his hand.

Shayne glanced over his shoulder, found all three men staring at Mabel in surprise, and let his body tense. Instantly Velk's gun jabbed his side.

"Don't try it, shamus," he said. "You can turn around slow now. Real slow."

As he backed off, carefully covering the detective, Shayne turned around and dropped his hands to his sides.

Mabel said, "Just hold him," crossed to the study door again, disappeared inside and locked the door behind her.

VI

HANK GOODRICH thoughtfully rubbed his chin with the muzzle of his gun, glanced at his two companions to make sure both were covering Shayne, and put his own gun away.

He said to Shayne, "Looks like you found what you weren't supposed to. I guess we got no choice now."

Shayne said, "Aren't you curious about what those books were?"

"Sure," Goodrich said companionably. "Tell us."

"Mabel's records of the dream racket."

Goodrich shrugged. "I figured it was something like that, or she wouldn't have been so upset."

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"Very complete records," Shayne said.

The nightclub manager frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You've got a page all to yourself in one of them," Shayne told him cheerfully. "Be too bad if the D.A. ever got a look at it."

Goodrich's eyes narrowed. He started toward the study door, but the lock turned and it opened before he got there. Mabel came out with her little automatic still in her hand.

"I want to see those books," Goodrich demanded.

Mabel's little automatic came up and centered on his stomach. "Bad enough to walk through a bullet?" she asked coldly.

Goodrich, his gun uselessly resting in its holster, took a defensive step backward. "Shayne says my name's in one of them," he complained.

"She has some even more interesting books in her bottom dresser drawer," Shayne volunteered.

No one except the redhead was prepared for the woman's reaction. He was gambling that the traditional rage of a woman scorned already had her on the verge of homicide. He hoped that the additional shame of knowing he had seen her secret library would push her over the brink.

It did. She swung her little gun toward Shayne and began firing as fast as she could pull the trigger.

Shayne swerved just as the gun muzzle began to move, though. Leaping to one side, he landed in a crouch in a position that put Hank Goodrich between him and the gun. After two shots that dug plaster from the wall where the redhead had been an instant before, Mabel swung the gun to follow Shayne and fired twice more.

Hank Goodrich took both in the stomach at point-blank range.

The other two men could have had clear shots at Shayne, but what he was banking on happened. Mabel's sudden action had riveted their eyes on her, first in amazement, then in horror when her last two bullets slammed into Goodrich.

They were still standing bug-eyed when the redhead's shoulder slammed into Goodrich's back with the force of a football block. The drive carried Shayne, Goodrich and Mabel right through the open door of the study and halfway across the room.

Mabel hit the floor first, crushed under the combined weights of Goodrich and Shayne. The air whooshed out of her and the small automatic skittered across the floor toward the desk.

Shayne, on top of the pile, kept right on going over it. His hand closed over the gun's butt and he swung on hands and knees to fire at the doorway just as Charlie

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Velk recovered his wits enough to start rushing into the room.

The bullet caught Velk high in the right shoulder. He staggered backward, dropping his gun, as Marshall Tarbox appeared in the doorway.

The thin man came in shooting. His heavy forty-five roared and the heat of a bullet seared the redhead's left cheek as he squeezed his own trigger in answer three times.

The third time the gun clicked empty, because it was only a seven-shot automatic. But two shots had been enough. Tarbox slowly crumpled to his knees, then pitched forward on his face.

Coming erect, Shayne leaped over the body in the doorway and scooped up the gun Velk had dropped. He didn't need it, because Velk had given up the fight. He crouched against the far wall, holding his right shoulder and making whimpering noises. Deciding he would keep for the moment, the detective stepped back over Tarbox's body into the study again.

Mabel Lake was conscious, but with all the wind knocked out of her. Pinned beneath Goodrich's inert two hundred pounds, she couldn't even move.

"Get him off of me!" she gasped at Shayne.

"Why?" the redhead inquired. "He'll keep you out of trouble."

Reaching under Goodrich's arm, he removed his gun before Mabel could get the idea of reaching for it. Before going back into the front room, he also took the precaution of capturing Tarbox's gun. He distributed his collection of four guns in various pockets.

Back in the front room the detective found Charlie Velk still clutching his shoulder and whimpering. Shayne barely glanced at him as he picked up the phone and dialed Police Headquarters. He asked for Chief Will Gentry.

When the chief answered, Shayne said, "Mike, Will. I've got a lot of work for you. I'm out at the home of a Miss Mabel Lake." He gave the address.

"What kind of work?" Gentry asked.

"Well, first we'll need an ambulance. I've got three wounded guys. Two of them dead, maybe."

Gentry squawked, "What've you got out there? A massacre?"

"Then you'll need some Narcotics boys," Shayne said cheerfully. "Plus a Homicide team. I guess that's all. See you, Will."

"Wait," Gentry was sputtering when the detective hung up.

VII

AN HOUR LATER most of the confusion was over. Goodrich, Tarbox and Velk had been carted off in an ambulance, all three still alive, but Goodrich and Tarbox in critical condition. A Narcotics

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team had departed with the heroin and records. Shayne had dictated and signed a statement of what had occurred. The only people left in the house were Shayne, Will Gentry, a Homicide sergeant named Dan Curry and Mabel Lake.

Mabel, looking both bedraggled and depressed, was seated in a front-room chair in handcuffs. Shayne and the two police officers stood in a semi-circle around her.

Sergeant Curry, who had been patiently waiting for the other activity to subside, said, "Now what's the Homicide deal, Shayne? Just the woman's accidental shooting of Goodrich?"

Shayne shook his head. "It's another case altogether. A guy named William Whitney, who worked for Mabel here before he disappeared. In two jobs. He had a legitimate one at the Lake Travel Agency, and was leg man for her H racket on the side."

Mabel glared up at Shayne. "What do you mean, leg man?" You know Marsh Tarbox was my leg man. He's been for four years."

All three men glanced at her, then Gentry and Curry returned their attention to Shayne.

The redhead said, "He was hooked and wanted to kick it. He couldn't by himself, so he was going to turn himself in and blow the whistle on the whole deal. It would be quite a coincidence if Mabel didn't have a hand in his disappearance."

Gentry and Curry looked down at Mabel again. She stared at Shayne, then emitted one short, wild laugh.

"You think *I* had Bill killed?" she asked half hysterically. "My best man!"

"Best man for what?" Shayne asked.

She laughed again, one short, wild note. "Why shouldn't I tell you? You've got me cold anyway. He was my top recruiter. His job was to bring in new customers."

Gentry said, "Retailers like Goodrich, you mean?"

"Retailers are easy," she said scornfully. "I mean customers for the retailers to sell to. You must know the pitch. First you start them on reefers. Free, of course. Then, when they're ripe, you suggest a brand new kick. That's free too, until they're hooked. After that they pay through the nose. Bill was the best in the business."

Shayne said, "Nice try, Mabel, but it won't work. I know he was turning himself in to kick the habit."

"What habit?" she spat at him. "Bill never touched the stuff in his life. That's for suckers."

Mabel emitted another hysterical laugh. "The blonde photographer over at Club Swallow? She's one of the suckers he recruited!"

Shayne looked from Curry to Gentry, then back at the woman. Frowningly he tugged at his left earlobe.

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"Maybe this Rose Henderson led you up the garden path, Mike," Gentry suggested.

"Yeah," Shayne said slowly. "I'm beginning to think that myself. Why don't you take Mabel downtown and book her, Will. I have a visit to make."

Abruptly he crossed to the dining-room door, strode through the dining room to the kitchen and out the back door to his car, still parked in the garage. . . .

It was after three P.M. when Shayne arrived at Rose Henderson's apartment. He hadn't had lunch, but didn't want to stop for that. Since the girl got off work at midnight, he assumed she went in about four P.M., and if he delayed he was afraid he'd miss her.

She answered the door in street clothes, carrying a purse. Apparently he had caught her just as she was ready to leave.

"Oh, hello, Mike," she said with surprise. "You're just in time to run me over to work."

Moving into the apartment, he pushed the door closed behind him and dropped his hat on an end table. "I doubt that the club will open today," he said. "Both the manager and headwaiter are in the hospital."

Her eyes widened. "What happened?"

"They caught some bullets in a gunfight."

Instead of surprise, a look of satisfaction flitted across her face. With sudden viciousness she said, "Good. I hope they die."

"The whole narcotics ring is broken up," the redhead told her. "The members not in jail will be as soon as the police finish studying some records. You're not going to be able to get the stuff for a long time, Rose. Not in this town."

"That's one way to kick it," she said.

"Is that why you did it?" he asked.

"Did what?"

"Started me after their scalps. Told me Marshall Tarbox was a new leg man, when you knew he'd been supplying Club Swallow all along."

She looked at him warily and made no answer. But there was a sudden fright in her eyes.

"You can't have your cake and eat it too, Rose. You got what you wanted. I broke the gang wide open. But you might have known I'd discover what Bill Whitney's real job was."

"What was that?" she asked with simulated innocence.

"Recruiting. You were one of his conquests. That why you killed him, Rose?"

She looked at him for a long time, her face expressionless. Then it suddenly crumpled. She said in a dull voice, "He said he loved me. He even asked me to marry him. Just to get me to trust him. A new kick, he said. He pretended to use it himself, too, until he had me

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hooked. Then he just laughed at me."

"He wasn't a very nice guy," Shayne understated.

"He deserved to die," the girl said with sudden fierceness. "It wasn't only me. There's no telling how many other lives he ruined. I did the world a favor."

"A lot of people deserve to die, Rose. It isn't a perfect world. But you'd have anarchy if individuals went around bumping all the rats off."

"Do *you* blame me?" she demanded.

"I'm not a judge, Rose." He examined her with something approaching pity. "What'd you do with the body?"

"I drove over to the bay in my car and dumped it in," she said. "Weighted. But I guess the police will find him." Her expression became a little unsettled. "Who's going to blame me for killing a rat like Whitney?" she asked. "What would you have done in my place?"

"I wouldn't have gotten hooked," Shayne said. "Come on. I'll drive you downtown."

"To the police station?" she asked fearfully.

"Eventually," he said. "I'm against murder as a matter of principle, but some killers deserve their full constitutional rights more than others. I'm taking you to a lawyer first."

A BELOW-THE-BORDER THRILLER—in the next issue

MURDER IN MEXICO

Crime Meets a New Kind of Adversary . . . in Jose Enriguez

by MANUEL FERNEZ

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MIKE SHAYNE As I Know Him

by BRETT HALLIDAY

In a very real sense Mike Shayne has become a national institution. Not only is he the favorite private eye of twenty million mystery story readers (He has appeared in 34 books, on radio and TV and in many new stories in MSMM) he is known and admired by men and women everywhere, even by those who neglect books because the demands of daily living are so exacting . . . or exciting. And here's the amazing story of how it all began, told by Brett Halliday himself.

MANY OF MY READERS are familiar with the dramatic first meeting between myself and the man who was later to become the central figure in a series of mystery novels featuring a red-headed, fighting Irishman whom I call Michael Shayne. This first meeting occurred on the Tampico waterfront more than a quarter of a century ago. I was a youngster then, working as deck-hand on a Pan American oil tanker, and on a stopover in Tampico a bunch of us spent the evening ashore in a tough waterfront saloon.

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I noticed him before the fight started, and was intrigued by him even then. A big, rangy redhead with deep lines already forming on his face. He sat at a table in the rear, surrounded by lights and music and girls. There was a bottle of *tequila* on the table in front of him, and two glasses. One of the glasses held ice water and he was drinking straight Mexican liquor from the other.

I don't remember how the fight started, but it turned into a beautiful brawl with half a dozen unarmed American sailors slugging it out on uneven terms with twice as many natives who seemed to be carrying knives or guns.

We were doing all right, as I remember, making what you might call a strategic retreat and almost out the door, when I got a crack on the head that sent me under a table.

I remember lying there and wondering dazedly, "What next, little man?" when I heard the crash of a rear table overturning and peered out to see the redhead sailing into the fracas.

He was a fighting man and you could see he loved it. Three or four Mexicans went down in front of his fists before he reached me, dragged me from under the table and tossed me out the door bodily.

That was all of that. I got back to the ship somehow; we sailed the next morning and I didn't know who the man was or what he was

doing in that saloon or why he came to the rescue of a fool kid he'd never seen before.

I still don't know any of those things, though I believe I now know him better than any other man alive.

It was four years before I ran into that red-headed Irishman again. A coincidence? Sure. This story is full of crazy coincidences . . . the sort that happen in real life but that no writer would dare put between the pages of a story.

It was in New Orleans and I was four years older and maybe a little wiser. I was broke and jobless, and I wandered into a Rampart Street bar on a foggy night.

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There he was, sitting alone at a rear table with a bottle in front of him and two water glasses. One of them was half full of ice water, and he was sipping cognac from the other.

He didn't recognize me, of course, but he did remember the fight in Tampico, and he grinned and gave me a drink of cognac when I thanked him for that time. He didn't talk much, but he did say he was working as a private detective. He was friendly and we were getting along fine until a girl walked in and stood at the bar, looking the place over.

I saw his big frame stiffen and the lines in his cheeks deepen into trenches as she walked toward us. His left thumb and forefinger went up to rub the lobe of his ear as she stopped beside our table and leaned forward and said, "Hello, Mike," in a throaty voice.

That was all. He didn't reply, and in a moment she turned away and went swiftly out the door. Two men had followed her inside, and they began to move slowly toward us . . . casually but purposefully.

That's when he leaned forward and told me swiftly to get out of town fast and forget I'd seen him.

He stood up before I could ask any questions, strolled forward and the two men closed in on each side of him. They went out in a group and disappeared in the swirling fog of Rampart Street.

That was our second meeting. I didn't know who the girl and the two men were, or why Mike walked out with them so quietly.

I still don't know, though I have a feeling that things happened then that had some bearing on the feud between him and Captain Denton of the New Orleans police . . . a feud which flared up anew during a case described in the book I titled MICHAEL SHAYNE'S LONG CHANCE.

It was years later when the next act occurred. I had begun writing books (not mystery novels) and was living in Denver, Colorado. I had never been able to put the memory of the redhead out of my mind, and there was a network radio program originating in New York which offered people a chance to broadcast an appeal for information concerning relatives or friends with whom they had lost contact.

Planning a business trip to New York to see my publishers, I wrote the manager of the program and asked to be allowed to tell my story over the air.

I did so, with an astonishing and completely unforeseen result. A few days after the broadcast I was informed from Denver that a man named Connor Michael Shawn, ex-actor, theatrical manager and private detective, had tuned in my broadcast on his deathbed and declared to his wife that he believed himself to be the man I was describing over the air.

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Connor Michael Shawn died the next day, and when I returned to Denver a few days later I immediately visited his wife and discussed the situation with her. Many of the facts of his life as she knew them checked with the dates and places of my story. The photographs she showed me were not conclusive. I felt that Shawn *might* have been my "Mike" . . . but I couldn't be positive.

I wasn't positive until more than a year later when I was holed up in a one-room log cabin at Desolation Bend, on the Gunnison River in Colorado, trying desperately to write three novels in thirty days (which I did, incidentally).

Mike turned up one day in a cabin near mine on the river. That was when I learned his real name (which isn't Shayne). He gave no explanation for his presence except that he was on vacation from a lucrative private detective practice in Miami, Florida.

This meeting, I now believe, was not so much of a coincidence as it appeared at the time. From small things he has let slip since then, I believe he had heard about the radio broadcast, and being in the neighborhood, had taken the trouble to look me up out of curiosity.

At any rate, that was the beginning of an intimate friendship that has now endured for more than a decade and has furnished material for thirty-four books and all the new stories that have appeared in MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE based on his cases.

We drank cognac together in his cabin and mine during the long lazy evenings that followed my stint at the typewriter, and talked about his work as a detective and my unrealized dream of writing mystery stories. There was no real compact reached between us at that time, but when he left to go back to Miami I had an invitation to visit him there whenever I wished.

I followed him south a couple of months later, and he seemed pleased when I turned up in his modest apartment on the north bank of the Miami River, overlooking Biscayne Bay.

That night over a bottle of cognac, he told me he had fallen in love for the first time in his life . . . with Phyllis Brighton whom he had just cleared of a charge of matricide.

Mike was a lonely and brooding man that night. He had sent Phyllis away, gently but firmly, a few days earlier, and he honestly did not hope ever to see her again. She was too young, he told me over and over again. Too young and too sweet and trusting to waste herself on a man like him.

I didn't argue with Mike that night. Nor point out any of the obvious things. I did draw him into a discussion of the case just ended, and before the sun rose over Bis-

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cayne Bay he had agreed to turn his notes on the Brighton affair over to me for a novel which I called DIVIDEND ON DEATH.

Before this book was published, he had met Phyllis Brighton again (as I have related in THE PRIVATE PRACTICE OF MICHAEL SHAYNE) and when that case was ended Mike had capitulated.

I was best man at their wedding, and saw them installed in the larger corner apartment above Mike's old bachelor quarters which he kept and fitted up sketchily as an office.

The next few years, I am positive, were the happiest Mike has ever known. Phyllis worried him sometimes by insisting as acting as his secretary and getting herself mixed up in some of his cases, but there was perfect companionship and understanding between them, culminating in a long-delayed honeymoon trip to Colorado—where Mike managed to get himself mixed up with murder in the old ghost town of Central City. He gave me the details of this case, and I used them in MURDER WEARS A MUMMER'S MASK.

Back in Miami, there was one more adventure together before that black night when I sat with Mike in the hospital waiting room, sweating it out with him while the baby which Phyllis so ardently desired was being born.

I went back to his apartment with him at dawn, and sat across the room from the big redhead in a deep chair while he wept unashamedly. Both Phyllis and the baby were gone, and the doctors didn't know why.

He swore at that time he would never touch another case that dealt with death, and I think he might have kept that resolution had he not received a telephone call in the night that sent him out on the trail of a vicious gang of black marketeers. I wrote about that one in BLOOD ON THE BLACK MARKET.

I noted a subtle change in Mike's inner character after Phyllis' death. In some ways he became more ruthless and driving and demanding of himself, but the hard outer shell of assumed cynicism was cracked and for the first time in his life he wasn't afraid to let traces of gentleness and pity shine through.

I was glad when he closed his office and went to New Orleans (MICHAEL SHAYNE'S LONG CHANCE), and gladder still after that case was ended and he had met Lucy Hamilton and acquired a new secretary.

People ask me now if Mike and Lucy are likely to be married. I have to answer honestly that I simply do not know. I am sure they understand and respect each other, and that Mike loves her as much as his memories of Phyllis will allow him to love any woman. They are happy together in the companionship and intimacy of

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dangerous work and that appears to be enough for them at the moment. Moreover, they are back at Mike's old hunting grounds in Miami now, and that town is beginning to be known as much for Mike as for its famous climate.

About the man himself . . . I have written most of what I know in my accounts of his cases. I think his most important attribute is absolute personal honesty. He not only does not lie to anyone else; what is more important, he does not lie to himself.

I think the characteristic most important in his spectacular success as a private detective is his ability to drive straight forward to the heart of the matter without deviating one iota for obstacles or confusing side issues. He has an absolutely logical mind which refuses to be sidetracked.

Shayne is just an average guy, with average education, intelligence and common-sense. He has no special knowledge which puts him ahead of the reader in solving a case. His method of solving a murder is to move right into the case on a line of absolute logic (disregarding the personal risk involved). In other words, he is never led aside by plot twists which require him to avoid questioning a suspect in the middle of the story just because that suspect knows the answers and thus would end the story. In doing this, Mike naturally makes mistakes. But if you'll study the Shayne stories carefully, I think you'll find he always does the thing that seems right *at the time*. It may well turn out to have been the wrong thing in the end. But it *is* the logical thing from the facts in his possession at the time he acts.

He *acts* on impulse sometimes, or on hunches; but always the impelling force is definite logic. While other detectives are wandering aimlessly about in a maze of conjecture and doubt, Mike selects a certain path and drives forward inexorably in one direction until he is proved right . . . or wrong. When he makes a mistake, he wastes no time in idle repining, but adjusts his sights and turns just as inexorably in another direction.

At various times readers have complained to me that in my stories about him Mike seems to seek danger needlessly; that he seems to take an almost masochistic pleasure in thrusting himself into a situation which inevitably results in physical pain to himself.

To those readers I can only say that I fear they have not followed the published accounts of his cases carefully. I have never heard Mike say, "Had I but known." Invariably, I have seen him calculate the risk involved carefully, weighing the results that may be attained by a certain course of action against the probable lack of results if he chooses to move cautiously. Once

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convinced that a risk is worth taking, he pushes forward and accepts the consequences as a part of his job.

It is this driving urgency and lack of personal concern more than any other thing, I think, that serves to wind up most of Mike's most difficult cases so swiftly. In time, few of his cases have consumed more than one or two days. Readers have complained that he doesn't seem to eat or sleep on a case. He does, of course, but only if there is nothing more important to do at the time. He drinks more cognac than any other man I have ever known, but I have never seen Mike drunk. Actually, while relaxing between cases he is a very moderate drinker.

This sums up Michael Shayne as I know him. The hardest work I do in writing my accounts of his cases is attempting to make my readers see Mike as he is, to feel what Mike feels, to know the man himself as I know him. Insofar as I succeed in this, my stories are successful. Certainly no writer ever had a better subject with whom to work.

Complete IN THE NEXT ISSUE

THE NEW MIKE SHAYNE NOVEL

Seldom has the Redhead come to grips with a crime enigma as darkly terrifying as this one, with so many dangerous developments and explosively unpredictable emotions. The mysterious death of a small dog involves Mike in the kind of client trouble that a private eye would naturally shun . . . unless it came wrapped up in a very special way. This one did . . . and it kept Mike sturdily engaged in a challenge that had to be solved.

DIE LIKE A DOG

By BRETT HALLIDAY

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THE FAMILIAR FACE

Set a thief to catch a thief—or someone worse!

By C. V. TENCH

IT HAPPENED FAST. The door of the station wagon was jerked open and a man's voice said, "Excuse me." Edith Miller leaned forward. The man in the roadway gave her a violent shove. He moved in beside her, the door slammed and the car got under way again. As the revolver muzzle pressed into her knee, Edith heard the man say, "Scream and you lose a leg."

At eight o'clock that night Reynolds made the phone call. His face was deadpan.

"Is that you, Miller? Okay,

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we've got news for you." He grabbed Edith Miller's arm and twisted it.

There was pain in her voice as she said into the mouthpiece, "I'm all right so far, dear. But you'd better obey their instructions. They'll kill me if you don't."

"Watch her, Red." Reynolds pushed her away. Into the phone he said, "Just because your wife has been snatched doesn't mean you won't be seeing her again. All you have to do is play along with us."

"What do you want?" came Harold Miller's unsteady voice.

"A hundred grand. We know you've got it. Are three cars and a swimming pool worth more to you than your wife?"

"Why you dir—"

"Don't say it." Reynolds gestured to Red Conlon to bring Edith within reach. He grabbed and twisted her arm. Edith cried out in pain.

"That was your wife again," Reynolds said into the phone. "I must warn you that what you just heard could only be the beginning. Well—do we talk business?"

When the call was finished Reynolds said to Mrs. Miller, "He needs three days to raise the money. For your sake, I hope he gets it."

Looking him full in the eyes, Edith said, "You'll get the money. My husband knows how to make money fairly fast."

On the evening of the second day Red Conlon reported back to Reynolds.

"No sign of a set-up, chief. Only routine callers. He hasn't left the house." He grinned at Edith. "The guy must be soft over you, baby. The light didn't go out in his room all night."

"All right. Enough of that." Reynolds eyed Conlon searchingly. "There's something else on your mind. What is it?"

Conlon scratched his head. "Somehow I feel I've seen this Miller character before. You know, a long time ago, before we planned this snatch."

"Maybe," Reynolds said. "But why should we let that worry us?"

The third evening Reynolds made the phone call. "Got the dough, Miller?" To Conlon he whispered, "Bring her close."

Edith said into the phone, "Yes, honey, I'm fine. So far they haven't touched me. If you pay up I don't think they will."

Pushing her away, Reynolds said into the phone, "Miller, put the money in a paper package. At ten o'clock start north on route fifteen. Go twenty miles straight north. Then you'll come to a town called Creston. Turn right on the dirt road that's just on the other side. Drive for six miles, then stop. And don't forget, Miller—any tricks and you'll see your wife, all right. But she won't look pretty and she won't be breathing."

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THE CAR PURRED softly along in the driving rain. Harold Miller glanced at the clock on the dashboard. 10.20. Creston should be coming into view at any moment now.

Five minutes later, on the outskirts of the town, he stopped for a moment to check the mileage on the speedometer. Turning on to the lonely and untravelled dirt road he drove for exactly six miles, then parked at the edge of the road as he had been instructed to do.

He made certain the package of money was on the seat beside him. After three nights without sleep his eyes burned and ached intolerably.

Now headlights were coming up behind him. The station wagon passed him and continued on for twenty or thirty yards. Then it turned, came back and drew up alongside Miller's car. Conlon, gun in hand, got out. Harold Miller handed him the package of money.

"Keep him covered while I check it," Reynolds said, as Conlon returned with the ransom to the car. In the glow from the dashboard lights he hurriedly thumbed the thick wads of currency.

Presently Reynolds put the bag in the seat beside him and said through the open window, "You're a smart apple, Miller. It's all here."

Harold Miller hardly heard him for Conlon was saying, "I've seen you some place before, punk."

Looking at him hard, Miller replied, "That's right. We have met before."

"Tie a kite to that social stuff," came impatiently from Reynolds. "We've got to keep moving."

"But what about my wife?" Miller asked tautly.

"Don't worry," Reynolds replied through the window, "we're not killers. We're not risking a murder rap. We just drugged her and left her on the bed. When she wakes up she'll come home. By then we'll be a long, long way off."

The station wagon drove away. After a moment Miller followed.

HAROLD AND EDITH MILLER sat in the kitchen spreading marmalade on toast and drinking hot coffee.

"It's lucky for me you didn't destroy your plates and equipment when I asked you to," Edith said.

"It was—yes." Harold Miller ran his fingers through his thinning hair wearily. "But now I've destroyed everything. And of course Conlon has seen me before. When I was doing that stretch for counterfeiting he was in the next cellblock.

"But I didn't do too good a job with the hundred grand. They're sure to be picked up. And, as kidnapping calls for a far heavier penalty than passing counterfeit bills, they won't be able to put up much of a defense."

Edith smiled tiredly and kissed him.

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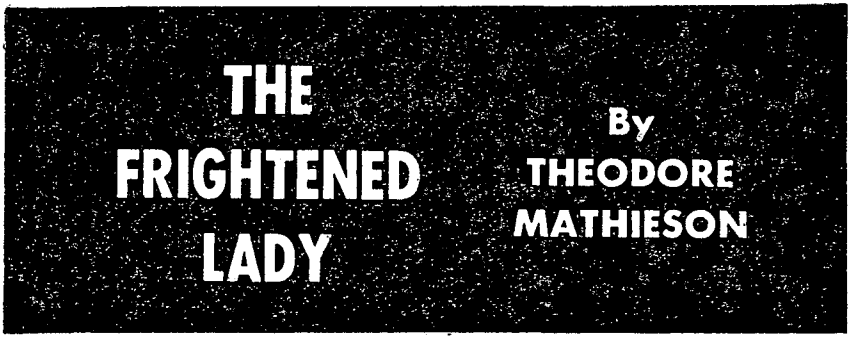
A NEW JIM TROY NOVELET



ON A SUNNY afternoon in late spring, Jim Troy came out of the *Nugget House,* where he'd been engaged in several sporadic, unproductive games of poker with two solid Cornish miners, and stared bleakly down the narrow, town of Grass Valley.

"Why did I ever come here?" he asked the air, and a blue-coated Chinese, padding past him with slippered feet on the board walk, turned to give him a toothless grin—amused at the tall, lean-faced young white devil who talked to himself.

Troy's searching gray eyes smiled in return, then he crossed the street and stepped under the shallow marquee of the *Criterion* to look at the red program-board covered with group photographs.

"You're the reason, Clara," he said ruefully, nodding his dark head at the pretty face of a blonde girl who looked out engagingly at him.

She was soft-featured, with full, sensual lips, and high cheek bones, which gave her dark eyes a piquant, exotic look. He'd met Clara Berg on the river boat *Yosemite* on the way to Sacramento, where the dramatic repertory company she worked for was scheduled to appear. He'd taken her out every night, meeting her with unusual punctuality at the stage doors of the *Metropolitan* after every performance, and then when the troupe came north for another week's engagement in Grass Valley, he'd come with it.

But it was over now. A cold

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Gambling in the Sierra gold towns could measure a man for his coffin. But Jim Troy raised the stakes a notch higher by rubbing elbows with Death on a horseshoe curve.

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campfire. She knew it, and so did he. There was no bitterness, just a tacit agreement. So why did he stand here prolonging his ennui in this profitless town?

Troy shrugged away the memory of a vagrant hope, and glanced at his watch. Four o'clock. The narrow gauge train left in forty-five minutes, and there was no reason for him not to be on it. He could be back on a San Francisco-bound river boat deep in a real game of poker, by eight-thirty this evening. He set off at once for his hotel to pick up his suitcase.

As he mounted the stone steps to the lobby, a round-faced, short-legged little man in a bowler hat and wearing an expensive alpaca overcoat, perhaps in his early forties, pushed excitedly past him on the way out. Thinking he had seen the man before, Troy turned and was surprised to look into pale blue eyes which were filled with unmistakable hostility.

"You are Mister Troy," the man stated flatly in a guttural accent, laying his gold-handled cane over his arm and drawing on a pair of brown, kid-skin gloves.

"Yes."

"I vill remember you!" the other promised, and without another word set off down the street. There was something ludicrous about the haughty strut of the little man, and Troy walked into the hotel smiling.

Inside the lobby, the desk clerk, a sallow-faced stripling said nasally: "Here is Mr. Troy now," and leered with prurient eagerness from the gambler to a woman sitting at one end of the lobby. It was Clara.

Looking magnificently blonde in her egret-plumed hat and ermine-trimmed red velvet jacket, she rose to greet him, picked up a suitcase, and then motioned him behind a marble-faced column out of sight of the curious desk clerk.

"I waited for you," she said breathlessly.

Troy was tempted to tell her straight out of his decision to leave alone on the afternoon train. But Clara looked at him with such naked pleading, that Troy, who could rarely refuse a sincere appeal for help from anybody, sighed and said: "I thought you were at rehearsal."

"I've quit the troupe."

"What?"

"I had to. I've got to get out of town right away, on the afternoon train. I want you to come with me, Jim—please."

"What's happened? Has that guy you knew in San Francisco been on your trail?"

"No, no it's not that," she said almost too quickly. "It's a long story, Jim. I'll tell you on the train."

"I'll get my suitcase . . ."

"Jim?" She put out a small, dimpled hand, and her voice was

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childishly ingenuous. "Maybe we were wrong to decide, without talking it over, that it was all through between us."

"Well, isn't it?" Troy could also be blunt.

She lowered her eyes, looking hurt. "I shan't ask anything more of you than to go with me to Frisco. I really need you with me, Jim. I'm afraid."

And when she turned her dark eyes up to him, Troy could see the flickerings of genuine panic in their depths.

"Don't worry, Clara," he said soothingly. "I'll be with you."

AS THE funnel-stacked narrow gauge locomotive puffed noisily out of the Grass Valley station, Troy, who sat in an end seat facing Clara, could look over her shoulder down the length of the coach at all the other passengers.

There were only eight or nine besides themselves, and midway down the car, staring aloofly out of the window, was the man in the bowler hat, who'd brushed past him at the hotel. Troy frowned, and then turned his attention to Clara.

"Now then, why are you running away? It must be pretty serious, if it made you decide to walk out on a repertory company. They'll blackball you for sure."

"I don't care," Clara whispered, and with trembling fingers she opened her purse and took out a slip of yellow paper with pale green lines and handed it to the gambler. Printed in block letters in ink was the name: SIR FRANCIS LEVINSON. That was all.

"I got that in the mail this morning. It was sent to the theatre."

Troy glanced at the envelope she held out to him, and saw it was postmarked Grass Valley.

"Who is Sir Francis Levinson?

"He's a character in a play in which I took my first part back in New York. The play was *East Lynne*. The man who played the part of Sir Francis Levinson, the villain, became my husband. His real name is Nate Mitchell. We were married only a year; he was unbelievably cruel, he often beat me, and he drank heavily. He was a brute, Jim."

"When I got my divorce he threatened he'd never let me be loved by any other man, he'd kill me first. I believed him, so I ran away, came out West. That was five years ago, and just when I thought I'd never hear of Nate again, I got that note. It's his way of letting me know he's found me. He wants me to suffer, and after I've suffered enough, he'll kill me, as he promised!"

Tears of fright and self-pity rolled down Clara's smooth cheeks.

Tory patted her hand. "Five years is a long time," he said. "Do you really think Nate would feel

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as strongly about it now? Maybe he just wants to scare you."

"Oh, no, Nate never forgot or forgave the smallest slight! He told me he waited fifteen years once to get even on an uncle who had struck him when he was a boy. Nate is cruel—unforgiving. Unless I can get away from him again and hide, I'm sure he'll kill me."

"Would you know him if you saw him?"

"I don't know. Nate was almost ten years older than I was, and he had the kind of face that could look any way he wanted it to. He was an impersonator for years before he became an actor."

Troy fell silent and listened to the rhythmic rattle of the wheels turn hollow as the train crossed a trestle over a manzanita-filled glen. Clara repaired her makeup while Troy studied the passengers speculatively.

Besides the man in the bowler hat there were two other men, four women and a little boy. One of the men, the closest to them, was a preacher in a broad-brimmed hat and high white collar, with the angular face of an ascetic, wearing a full black mustache that drooped over his compressed lips like the black mouth of a tragic mask. He was reading a newspaper and his expression left little doubt that he was privately condeming the worldly activties of his fellow men.

The other man, sitting a few seats behind the bowler hat, was a red-faced, sandy haired fellow with bushy eyebrows, who played a two-handed string game, which the little boy across the aisle watched with fascination. From time to time, the player shot an amused glance at the child, but the way he fumbled occasionally with the string, and lurched in his seat as the coach took a curve, made it apparent he'd had too much to drink. He wore a faded blue mackinaw and a heavy woolen cap, and Troy got the impression the man was, or had been, a sailor.

Troy leaned forward towards Clara and whispered: "It's possible you might be followed. There are three men in the car. Turn around and see if you think any one of them is Nate Mitchell."

She shook her shoulders helplessly. "I couldn't tell from here, Jim. I'm near-sighted."

"Then I'm going to walk you to the back of the car. As we go down the aisle, look at each man. The first is a preacher, the second a business man of some kind, and the third, I think, could be a sailor. Ready?"

"All, right, Jim."

The preacher looked up from his paper as they passed and transferred his disapproval from the printed word to the sight of Clara in her brightly-colored jacket and painted face. Troy

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could see his mind work. Painted face meant fallen woman, or her equivalent, an actress. As the preacher's censorious stare passed on to him, Troy felt like saying aloud: *And I'm a gambler.* But instead he merely smiled, the kind of tolerant smile he hoped would infuriate the preacher. It did. The man flushed and snapped his eyes back to the newspaper.

Clara paused as they reached the seat of the man in the bowler hat, and the object of their scrutiny switched his attention from the passing scenery first to Clara, and then to Troy. The gambler felt again the wave of enmity from the man's cold blue eyes, and wondered why the man should hate him. The next moment Clara moved on down the aisle.

But before they reached the Mackinawed man, the little boy, whose interest in that gentleman's string manipulations had waned, ran into the aisle, looking up into Clara's face, and piped in a childish treble: "Oo-oh! Look at the pretty lady!"

He ran towards Clara and threw his arms around her.

"Bobby!" A plain, sallow-faced mother, shock showing in every lineament of her face, half rose from her seat.

But Clara reached down coolly, her lovely face expressionless, and pulled the little boy's arms from around her knees as one might disengage an impeding branch of a blackberry bush, and returned the child wordlessly to his mother. Whatever else Clara might be, Troy thought amused, she was not in the least maternal.

"Ah, Miss Clara Berg, the enchanting actress!" the Mackinawed man said, rising with clumsy gallantry as they reached him, and pulling off his woolen cap. He stood blinking and grinning with his hair tousled, like some insolent leprechaun. Then the train took another curve and he went sprawling back against the window frame with a mighty thump.

Out on the vestibule platform, Troy let the coach door swing shut behind him before he spoke.

"Did you recognize any one of them?" he asked.

Clara shook her head, staring as if hypnotized at the twin ribbons of rails which unrolled behind them.

"Then why did you pause at the man with the bowler hat?"

Clara stiffened and turned with a gasp. "I—didn't." Then when she saw Troy's evident disbelief, she said impatiently: "All right, I know him. But he is not Nate. Of that much, at least, I'm sure."

"Why?"

"Because his name is Franz Auslander. He lives in Frisco and deals in mining equipment."

"And he's the man whom you knew there?" Troy remembered how Auslander had come rushing

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impatiently out of the hotel lobby. "And you've already talked to him this afternoon?"

"Yes. He asked me for the fiftieth time, I think, to come back to him, but I turned him down. I'm sick of him."

"And are you afraid of him?"

"Of Franz?" Clara's lip curled contemptuously. "He's the last man I'd be afraid of. He doesn't count."

"Just the same, I'd hate to meet him alone in a dark mine."

"He might try to get even with *you*, Jim, but he'd never harm me. He's even a little bit ridiculous, in spite of his money. It's Nate I've got to look out for!"

"Then could one of the other two be Nate? The sailor, maybe? He knew your name."

"He could have seen me on the stage, like a hundred others."

"The preacher then?"

"Either of them could be Nate, really. They're both the same build, and Nate dyed his hair even when I knew him! They've both got gray eyes, too, just like Nate."

The door from the coach opened suddenly, and the sailor, looking raffish now with his woolen cap tilted over one bushy eyebrow, poked his head out at them, ducking it in mock sobriety at Troy.

"The little boy was right, Mister," he said thickly. "She's a mighty pretty lady!"

Troy and Clara had returned to their seats, when Troy rose some twenty minutes later, and excusing himself, went back again to the vestibule to smoke his cigar. Here in broad daylight in a public coach no danger could threaten Clara, and although he had committed himself to protecting her, he found her insistent demands upon him a weight upon his spirit. He was also aware that he didn't like her any more. Now that Clara knew their brief relationship was over, she did not bother to camouflage with coquetry her less charming characteristics—her self-absorption, her deceptiveness, her lack of charity towards others.

So it was with relief that Troy stood alone, clinging to the handrail halfway down the vestibule steps, sucking his cigar and watching the train glide through smooth cuts of warm, red earth, past cinnabar trunks of yellow pine and the thick, green foliage of the live oak. He remembered from his northbound trip this tree-tunneled passage, the steep ravine below. It came just before the loop to the bridge over the Bear River.

Then suddenly he was aware there was somebody behind him. But before he could turn he felt the violent blow from a foot applied to the small of his back, and he went sailing out and over the embankment. Even though he fell upon soft pine needles and aromatic tar weed, he was momen-

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tarily stunned. But he came to on his feet, shouting, The train was still in sight, but going too fast for him to catch up with it. And upon the back of the coach, grinning with a small-boy triumph stood Franz Auslander. He even had the effrontery to raise his cane and wave it derisively.

Troy stood motionless for several seconds, rubbing the back of his neck before he remembered about the loop. Then he was running, clambering up the embankment to the right-of-way, and stumbling back fifty yards over the sleepers to a rutty, dirt road, that led steeply down into the ravine. Past deer brush that whipped cruelly across his face he fled, down the red earth slickened by spring rains, across the rickety wooden bridge that spanned a swollen stream.

To his left perhaps half a mile away, he could hear the warning squeal of wheel flanges as the train took the top of the horseshoe curve. In a few seconds it would be starting back towards him again!

Now he left the road, which turned to meander uncooperatively along the stream, and struggled up a slope through dense chaparral. Instantly he was in trouble. Sharp, skeletal fingers of the manzanita clawed at his clothes and raked his face, but Troy persevered, clutching his hat, and breasting frantically through the resistant thicket. Progress was difficult. For a few seconds he would be comparatively free, following an open deer trail, then the way would close up and he would struggle nightmarishly against the vegetable enemy that seemed determined to delay him.

Finally as the sounds of the engine laboring up the grade approached his position upon the hillside, Troy found an open way that led directly to the railroad embankment. He still had a few seconds to make up his mind what he would do.

Auslander, having probably discovered with dismay that the train was doubling back, would doubtless remain upon the rear platform to see that Troy did not clamber aboard. Troy decided to catch the engine, if he could . . .

When he re-entered the coach from the baggage car, the train was passing over the high bridge, and Auslander was already back in his seat. The German was breathing heavily and looked tense, although he had the air of a man who feels he has done well. He was smiling to himself as he peered out of the window down into the depths of the canyon. Suddenly he turned his head, saw Troy standing in the aisle and his mouth went slack. Fear crept into his blue eyes.

"You've been gone a long time, Jim," Clara exclaimed petulantly.

Disregarding her, Troy stepped

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past the preacher to Auslander, and with an amiable smile, leaned over and removed the bowler from his head. The man was bald as an egg! Auslander watched Troy in fascinated horror as the latter, still smiling, picked up his cane which hung from the top of the forward seat, and raising it deliberately, brought the head of it down with a smart crack upon his occiput.

"Let that teach you not to push people off trains!" Troy said severely, speaking as if to a little child.

Auslander's thick underlip quivered and he looked as if he were about to cry. The preacher, who had turned to watch the chastisement, clicked his tongue disapprovingly. The sailor had fallen asleep and observed none of it. The women were chittering nervously, and Clara burst suddenly into a shriek of derisive laughter that made Troy's spine prickle.

WHEN THE *Delta King* swung out into mid-channel from the Front Street docks in Sacramento that evening at eight forty-five, Troy and Clara stood soberly at the stern among the other passengers, watching the dense lights of the city give way to the meager sprinkling of farm lights, and finally to unbroken darkness.

"They're both on board, aren't they?" Clara said in a taut voice after a while, when the others had gone.

"Yes. And Auslander."

"I saw you speaking to them in the waiting room."

"I introduced myself. One is John Ferris. And he was a seaman, a captain, he told me, of one of these river boats about ten years ago. The way he closed up on details makes me suspect that there was some scandal. He isn't a captain any more. He works for a marine outfitting company in San Francisco. I don't think he's very sure of himself; he has a hard time looking you in the eye."

"And the preacher?"

"A traveling Septaguint minister. Revivalist sort, from up Seattle way, he says. Name's Winter."

"Do they seem all right?"

"So far as I can see."

Clara put her hand to her throat. "I don't feel well, Jim. Take me back to my stateroom."

Troy piloted her up the iron steps to the upper deck to her cabin on the starboard side. She had left the oil lamp on, and the minute they entered, the yellow piece of paper upon the floor near the door gave them both a start. Troy picked it up.

"Sir Francis Levinson," he read aloud, and put the paper in his pocket. Clara gasped, and sank down weakly upon her bunk, looking so pathetically fearful that Troy felt sorry for her.

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"Look," he said. "did you ever tell Auslander about Nate?"

"Never!" Clara cried, and her voice carried such conviction that Troy could not disbelieve her. "You're the only one I have ever told about Nate. No, no, Franz would never have the imagination to try to frighten me this way. Nate is on this boat. I know it. And you mustn't leave me, not for a moment, Jim!"

Troy made her lie down on the bunk and covered her with a blanket. Then he sat down at a table and taking out a deck of cards played several games of poker solitarie until Clara's quiet breathing told him she was asleep.

Then he stopped playing, and picking up a single card, blew thoughtfully upon the edge of it.

His rumination was halted by the sound of a footstep outside the door. He sprang silently to his feet, watched the doorknob turn; then he seized it and pulled the door open.

Ferris, the ex-captain stood there swaying slightly, with a foolish grin on his face.

The incident had not awakened Clara, so Troy held his fingers to his lips and then stepped out on deck, closing the door behind him. The night was clear and mild, and a gentle breeze from the starboard bow blew most of the sound of the chunking and splashing of the rear paddle wheel far astern, so the dark was almost quiet.

"Why are you sneaking around this cabin?" Troy demanded.

"Well, now, I didn't know you were her watchdog, Mister Troy," Ferris said, murkily aggrieved. "I got to thinking about Miss Berg, that's all. Saw her act at the *Criterion* last night. She's a mighty pretty lady. I understood she's not married. Honestly, you didn't look too interested, and I figured that it's a free country—"

"Not that free, Ferris."

"No, I guess not."

"You stay clear of Miss Berg."

"Yes, sir!" The man laughed softly. "That's funny, y'know. The crew of the old *Ada Hancock* used to say 'Yes, sir' to me. I was their cap'n, y'know."

"What happened to the *Ada Hancock?*" Troy asked.

"She blew up. I went right up with her, pilot house and all, and came down on the texas deck, near the smokestack, with me still intact! Nine people killed. And I should have died too, Mr. Troy. Yes, sir, I should have died, too!" And with that he wobbled aft.

Troy stepped back to the stateroom door then and tried to open it, but found the lock had snapped shut behind him.

"Who is it?" Clara's voice hinted at hysteria.

"Jim."

Her face appeared at the cabin window, peering fearfully through the louvers. Troy stepped obligingly under the deck light, and

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when she identified him, she turned the lock and he entered.

"Take this, Clara," he said pushing his Derringer into her hand. "It only has one shot, but it's enough to discourage even Nate Mitchell. I'm going to my stateroom to get my revolver."

"Who were you talking to?"

"Ferris. It seemes you made a conquest."

"I'm afraid of him and of the preacher, too."

"Just stay that way. I'll be right back."

"Hurry, Jim."

As the cabin door closed behind him, he heard Clara snap the lock, and to make sure he tried the door, then strode quickly down the deck forward to his stateroom. Inside his cabin he lit the oil lamp swinging in gimbals over the washstand, but had barely time to unlock his suitcase before a knock sounded on the door.

"Come in," he said, and was surprised to see the preacher, Winter, enter. There was something wrong with the man. His features looked sharpened to a razor's edge, his eyes glittered, and Troy could see droplets of sweat on his pale high forehead.

"Mr. Troy," the preacher said in a tight, breathless voice, "when you took the trouble to speak to me in the waiting room earlier this evening, I though you must be a kind man, one who would not turn away from a direct supplication from God."

Troy's eyes narrowed. "I haven't much time right now, Mr. Winter."

"Enough, I hope, to hear one or two words. I am a champion against sin, because God has chosen me to be his warrior. Even when it seems I interfere with private affairs, nevertheless I—"

All the while he spoke, Winter shuffled step by step closer to Troy.

"Stand where you are, Winter," Troy snapped.

The preacher, close to a chair, dropped into it like a puppet whose master had loosened the strings. He breathed gustily, his eyes gleaming brighter than ever.

"I wanted to speak to you especially about Miss Berg."

"What about her?"

"Obviously you are not married to her. I saw no ring upon her finger."

"No, we are not married."

"And yet you act towards her as if you were her husband."

Troy snorted. "So much so, we occupy separate cabins."

"But you are possessive!"

"Let's just call it protective. And now I'll ask you to get out."

The preacher rose stiffly, like a spring coiled, ready to release itself. "You will not listen to what I have to say?"

Troy, about to make a sharp retort, caught a faint glimmer of

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anguished pleading behind the strange man's eyes, and relaxed suddenly with a capitulatory laugh.

"Look, Reverend. Right now I've got my hands full with a very frightened lady, and I've got to get back to her. So if you don't mind, I'll be glad to talk about my sins to you a little later."

The preacher stared at him wordlessly, his eyes blinking, and Troy could see the passion or determination, or whatever it was, recede like a neap tide, until in just a few seconds Winter stood there wilted and spiritless.

"Very well, Mr. Troy," he murmured and went slowly out of the cabin.

Troy looked after him with a thoughtful frown, then with renewed haste, dug into his suitcase for the revolver with the rosewood stock. As he loaded it, the *Delta King* tooted twice in greeting to another river boat bound upstream. Troy could hear the wash of her side paddles and the weary creak of her superstructure close by, and then a strident return greeting from her whistle.

The *Capital City,* probably. He wished fleetingly that he were on it, sweeping in the winnings from a well-established game, then shrugged away the wish guiltily. He was only making a just payment. A man didn't get something for nothing in this world.

Leaving his lamp burning, Troy put the pistol in his pocket and stepped out of her door. That was the last thing he knew. A blow from a heavy object swung out of the darkness, striking him upon the forehead, and he crashed back insensible and fell full length upon the deck of his cabin.

THE SUN HAD been shining dimly in a strange sky for aeons before Troy became aware that it was his own cabin lamp, seen against a blue-tinted, tongue-in-groove bulkhead. He lay upon his back on the deck, his body trembling with the vibration of the ship, and felt a heavy weight lying across his legs. He raised his head slowly, feeling agonizing stabs in it that splayed bars of blackness across his vision. But what he saw cleared his mind instantly of its dark fog.

It was Clara, lying face down across his legs, and she was dead.

Her face, turned towards him, with one cheek pressed pitifully against the deck, was dark and twisted.

With a cry of instinctive dread, Troy pulled himself frantically from under the dreadful weight, and sat shaking upon his bunk. For five minutes he sat there, drawing on all his resources to keep himself from running in panic out of the cabin. But then suddenly his shaking stopped and his mind was his own again.

He got up and went to the

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washstand mirror to look at his wound. He'd been struck above the hair line, so the swelling did not show, but a small smear of blood stretched diagonally across his forehead. He dabbed at it, with a moistened towel, after which he took a bottle of whiskey out of his suitcase, tilted it twice and then sat quietly as he felt with gratification the spread of its analgesic warmth.

He glanced at his watch. Ten thirty-five. So far as he could judge, he'd come to get his gun around nine-thirty. Winter had detained him at least five minutes. That meant he'd been unconscious a full hour! What had happened meanwhile? Why was Clara here?

He went over and lifted Clara gently from the floor and laid her in his bunk, seeking in vain for a trace of pulse or the faintest breath. As his hands passed over her, a paper crackled at her bosom, and reaching down he pulled out a crumpled yellow sheet covered with small, compact writing.

Clara,

I want you to remember these things. The night at Hardwick's Hotel in Scranton, when I found you in the arms of another man. How I told you I was going to bring divorce, and you ran to your mother's home to capture and run away with our little son. You didn't want him, really—you never wanted children—but you knew how I loved him. You tried to hide him at your sister's in Harrisburg, but from the icy weather and the draughty trains our little boy died. You killed him.

And now I've found you at last, Clara, and I shall kill you. But first I shall let your shallow heart know anguish—a different kind from mine, who anguished over my little son—but anguish is anguish nonetheless, even when it is selfish.

Until I come to you, Clara, or you come to me.

NATE

Troy folded the letter and put it thoughtfully into his pocket. Slowly, like ice forming crystals, he reconstructed what had happened. Clara had probably received this letter shortly after the first Levinson warning. She would not show it to Troy because Nate's words would make it clear she was lying about her relationship with her husband. But it would account for her being so sure Mitchell was after her.

Then tonight Clara's murderer had wanted him out of the way, so he could be free to attack Clara. But the murderer had barely finished slugging Troy, perhaps was standing over him to make sure he would stay out of the picture long enough, when Clara herself, impa-

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tient at Troy's delay, had left the safety of her cabin and come to his.

She certainly wouldn't have admitted anyone into her own stateroom in her fearful mood! And she must have run directly into the arms of her murderer, as Mitchell had predicted in his letter.

Troy's eyes hardened as he thought of Winter. Had the man waited outside, and clubbed him as he opened his door? Had he intended to attack Troy in his cabin in the first place, and had he, Troy, forestalled his plan by too great a watchfulness?

Suddenly Troy was tired, and he stopped thinking and pressed his fevered head against the cool bunk pole.

THE KNOCKING came twice before he heard it—discreet, respectful.

It was the steward, a heavy-figured, amiable Irishman whom Troy knew from previous trips. Troy had stepped out on deck, closing the door behind him and scowling heavily.

"You wanted to see me, Mr. Troy?" the steward asked.

"Did someone say I did?" Troy parried.

"Yes, sir. You left a note on my spindle."

"What did it say, I forget." He made a hazy gesture to his forehead.

"Well, sir, it simply told me to look in cabin one hundred and two."

Again Troy was shaken, but he thought quickly and said: "Well, I wanted to ask if all the cabins were opened by a different key?"

"Oh, yes, sir. Every one different. And the master key I keep in my pocket at all times." The steward patted his coat pocket where it was obvious the key now resided.

"And the locks are hard to pick?"

"Impossible, sir. They're Newgate locks. I've tried 'em myself—just to test 'em, of course! If anyone gets into your cabin, Mr. Troy, it's because you forgot to lock your door!"

"Thanks steward." Troy nodded as if his curiosity were satisfied.

"Thank you, sir." And the steward went on his way.

Troy stepped back inside the cabin, took another swallow of whiskey, and faced the fact. The murderer had intended that the steward should discover Troy lying upon his cabin deck with the dead Clara Berg beside him! The fact that Troy had awakened in time to ward off the disclosure didn't mean that he was safe. The murderer would probably try again to implicate him. All that Troy had accomplished was the gaining of a little time. He would have to act fast.

The first thing he had to do was

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to get Clara back to her own stateroom.

The walk along the deck with the dead woman in his arms seemed an endless trek along the rim of disaster, and Troy prayed that no passengers would appear. He had almost reached her stateroom when the thought struck him with paralyzing force that the door might have locked itself behind her. Sweat broke from every pore, as he felt with tingling fingers for the knob. But then the door swung open and he stepped inside, kicking it shut after him. He laid Clara gently upon the bunk with shaking arms and then stood looking around him.

Everything appeared to be the same as he'd left it: His poker solitaire set-up still lay upon the table. Clara's suitcase stood open, and her clothes, neatly folded, lay within. Troy frowned. Obviously the garments had not been disturbed, and he had expected that her murderer would search for that incriminating letter. Why hadn't he?

Slow, heavy footsteps sounded along the deck, and Troy snatched the revolver from his pocket. He'd neglected to lock the door. The steps paused, and Troy tensed for an unwelcome encounter.

"Clara?"

It was Auslander's voice.

Troy swung the door open. "Come on in, Auslander."

Blinking, the round-faced man stepped inside. "Don't you ever let Clara be alone for a vhile?" he asked, aggrieved.

"I'm afraid she's alone for good now, Auslander," Troy said, motioning towards the bunk.

"Was ist!" Auslander's blue eyes stared at the still form beneath the blanket, and his face turned ashen. "Clara?"

"She's dead. Somebody strangled her."

Auslander let out a cry and turned, fumbling for the door knob, but Troy pushed his revolver roughly into his side.

"Sit down! Somebody's trying to palm off the blame for this thing on me. I've got to find out who killed Clara before we reach San Francisco. Here—read that."

He pushed Nate Mitchell's letter into Auslander's hands and the latter read it, forming some of the words with trembling lips. When he had finished he looked up with round, wondering eyes.

"Then it is Mitchell who killed her. Give it to the police only, then you are free."

"I've got a responsibility," Troy said grimly glancing towards Clara. "I'm going to find him myself. I think Mitchell is one of two men who are on this boat with us. Ex-captain Ferris, or the preacher, Winter."

"How will you find out?"

"I may need your help. Even if you have been hating me, why shouldn't you give it? After all,

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Clara is out of it now. There's no reason for us to quarrel!"

"Clara!" Tears rolled down Auslander's fat cheeks, and he stepped over to the bunk and leaned over it, his shoulders quaking. After a few seconds he made an effort to control himself. "I will help you, Mr. Troy."

"Good." Troy replaced the revolver in his pocket. "First of all, I gave Clara a Derringer pistol to defend herself with. It should be here somewhere, so let's look for it."

The German nodded and started searching the table and the floor while Troy examined the bunk, lifting Clara's head gently to search under the pillow. He had purposefully omitted telling Auslander that Clara had come to his cabin. No need to incriminate himself needlessly.

Troy didn't believe she would have walked along the deck without the pistol, but the fact remained that it had not been in her possession when he'd found her dead beside him and that fact was all-important.

Five minutes later, Troy pondered an apparently insoluble puzzle. The little Derringer was not in Clara's cabin. Where was it?

"I can't see the murderer taking the gun with him," Troy said thoughtfully.

"Unless he wanted the pretty little thing for himself!"

"But if he were found with it, it would incriminate him."

"But if he wanted it very badly," Auslander said with a wise look "and he vas sure that somebody else would be held for the crime, and that he would not even be investigated . . ."

Troy shook his head. "I doubt it. But I'll keep my eye out for it, just the same. I'm going to search their cabins—Winter's and Ferris.'"

"Where will you get the key?"

"That's easy." Troy took out his revolver again. "They'll do the searching themselves."

"And how can I help?"

"Stay here, or wait in my cabin. One hundred and two."

Auslander looked sadly towards the bunk, then with a sigh he removed his alpaca overcoat, stripped off his kid-skin gloves and placed them in his pocket.

"I will stay here with Clara," he said. "It is the least I can do for her, now!"

JIM TROY found Winter in the dining cabin, staring moodily into a gilt-framed back mirror, and sipping an evening cup of coffee.

"I'm ready to listen to your talk now, Mr. Winter," Troy said. "I've got more time. Let's go to your cabin."

The preacher turned sullen eyes upon Troy and shook his head. "The spirit does not move me to talk to you now."

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"Not even about Clara Berg?"

Troy weighted the question heavily with implication, and it worked. The preacher gave him a quick look, rose, paid his check, and led the way amidships to his cabin. Inside he turned and demanded: "Now what do you wish to say about Clara Berg?"

"I think you ought to pray for her soul, Winter. She's dead."

At his words, Winter's mouth fell open, and his face looked more like a tragic mask than ever; the intake of his breath rasped plainly. But Troy was in no mood to be gullible. He took out his revolver.

"I have'nt much time, Winter. I'm out to find who murdered her. So I'll ask you to unpack your suitcase there, and lay every article on the bunk."

"Clara is really dead—murdered?"

"You can take my word for it."

"What are you looking for?"

"Just unpack."

Like a man in a dream, Winter took item after item out and laid them upon the blanket. Once he stopped and asked: "Whom do you think killed her?"

When Troy didn't answer him, he continued his task until the suitcase was empty.

Troy pointed at a gray checked suit and a few brightly colored neckties. "Isn't that strange garb for a Septaguint minister?"

For the first time color appeared in Winter's cheeks, but he said nothing. Troy stepped over to the suitcase and slipped his hand into the wide pocket inside the lid. Then he pulled out a writing pad and held it up triumphantly. The paper was yellow with light green lines.

"This is the kind of paper that Clara's ex-husband wrote his threatening notes and letters on! It's too much for coincidence. I think you're Nate Mitchell!"

The other made a sudden dash for the cabin door, eluding Troy's grab for him. By the time the gambler reached the deck, the pseudo-preacher was climbing over the taffrail. But before he could release his hold to drop into the dark waters of the river, Troy had seized his arm and was pulling him back. Mitchell struggled frantically, but at that moment the steward appeared, and not unused to violence on board, held on to him matter-of-factly, while Troy terminated the man's struggles with a smart blow from the butt of his revolver.

They laid the half-conscious Mitchell on the bunk in Troy's own cabin, and when the steward had gone, Troy fetched in Auslander who had remained in Clara's cabin. The German's eyes were red from weeping.

"What have you found? Auslander asked, gasping with excitement.

"Him," Troy said pointing at

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the man in the bunk. "That is Nate Mitchell, Clara's ex-husband."

"Schweinehund!" the expletive broke like a whip lash from Auslander's lips as he looked down at the pale face. "He murdered mine Clara!"

Mitchell's eyes fluttered and he looked up at Trop. "No, no," he said faintly. "I did not."

"Do you deny that you're Mitchell?" Troy asked.

"No, I'm Nate Mitchell. But I didn't kill Clara. I swear it."

"You'd better talk."

"Yes." Mitchell moisted his lips, and when he spoke again his voice was stronger. "I was married to Clara. She ran away from me, took our child. It died. I swore to kill her. It took me five years to find her." He stopped talking as if the effort were too great.

"Tonight you came to my cabin," Troy prompted. "But not to save my soul."

"No. I came to strike you down, so I could get at Clara. But when you told me she was so frightened, and you were so—damned sympathetic, concerned. I don't know. I knew I couldn't go through with it. I was ready to leave without ever seeing Clara again!"

"You'll have a hard time convincing the police of that when I show them your letter."

"I know." Mitchell nodded and closed his eyes, as if he'd given up.

"Well, that frees you," Auslander said, patting Troy upon the shoulder.

"I don't know." Troy looked down frowning at the pale, quivering Mitchell. "When he came to my cabin he was ready to go up like a balloon, and then all of a sudden he wilted. He might be telling the truth."

"Maybe afterwards he got up his courage again."

"Maybe."

Troy never knew afterwards exactly why he did it. The feeling came, a slight tingling in his heart, the way he felt when he knew what card his opponent held, and spoke it correctly without thought. But this hunch had nothing to do with cards. He ran to the cabin door.

"Watch Mitchell. Don't let him get away," Troy ordered Auslander curtly, and stepped out on deck. There were no passengers visible. He ran softly to Clara's cabin, paused to listen outside the door, then thrust it open.

Ex-captain Ferris stood stiffly by Clara's bunk, as if stricken by some rare paralysis. His face, when he turned it jerkily towards Troy, was frozen with fear, and in his right hand, held like a useless toy, was Troy's Derringer.

TWENTY MINUTES later Ferris entered Troy's cabin, followed by the gambler. Ferris paused momentarily to stare at Mitchell, who

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still lay with his eyes closed, breathing as if asleep, then sat down nervously near the bunk. Auslander's eyes opened wide when he saw the Derringer in Troy's hand.

"You found it! Vhere?"

"Ferris. He says he paid a visit to Clara earlier this evening, after I'd warned him away. The door was open and she wasn't there. He went in and looked around. He saw the Derringer lying on the bunk, couldn't help picking it up and putting it in his pocket. I found him there just now, returning it. He says his conscience got the better of him. He was stunned when he saw Clara dead upon the bunk."

"You believe him?" Auslander asked.

"Yes, I do. Because he didn't murder Clara."

"Then Mitchell did."

"No."

"Who, then?"

"You did, Mr. Auslander."

The German turned red and began spluttering. "That is ridiculous!"

"Is it?" Troy held up a pair of light brown kid skin gloves. "I found these in the pocket of your coat which you left in Clara's cabin. The fingers of this glove are splattered with blood. My blood. Blood from the end of the cane you hit me with!"

"Give me that!" Auslander cried truculently, starting forward.

Troy was ready for him. He jabbed a quick right fist to the German's jaw, and Auslander went down in a heap, his head hitting the pipe beneath the washstand. He lay there, looking groggily up at Troy.

"That evens us a little bit," Troy said mildly. "Now why did you kill Clara?"

Auslander eyed the glove Troy held as if he were starving for it. Then he closed his eyes briefly and shuddered, and began speaking very low.

"She laughed at me when you hit me on the head on the train. I had taken so much from Clara, but that was the last straw. I couldn't stand being laughed at in front of you, who had won her from me. I made up my mind to kill her then!"

Troy nodded to Mitchell and Ferris. "For telling the truth, you may have the gloves." And he threw the pair towards Auslander, and the latter snatched them and examined them.

"Mein Gott, there is no blood!" Auslander rose shakily to his feet and shook the gloves accusingly at Troy.

"No, I made that up. Once I suspected you, I had to find a way to make you commit yourself."

"How could you know?" Auslander asked incredulously.

"I told you I believe Ferris' story about the Derringer. If Ferris found the pistol on the bunk,

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that meant that Clara was taken from the cabin after she was unconscious or dead. I think you killed her there. She never would have come to me along that deck without carrying the gun!

"But if she was attacked in her own cabin, who could have succeeded in getting in? She would never have admitted either Ferris or Winters. She suspected one of them of being her husband. And before she would have opened that door to anyone, she would have looked through the louvers to make sure her visitor was who he said he was, the way she did even with me earlier this evening, when I got myself locked out.

"There was no tampering with the lock—the steward told me that was impossible. Therefore, Clara had admitted somebody. Who else would she admit besides me? Only a man for whom she had contempt, who, as she told me this afternoon 'didn't count'. In other words, *you,* Auslander. She considered you a joke, so she admitted you and you strangled her!"

"She shouldn't have laughed the way she did that last time," Auslander wailed.

Troy looked wearily at the strained faces of the three men around him, caught sight of his own battered face in the mirror.

"You know what I think?" he asked. "Clara is still laughing—at all four of us! And in a way, I can hardly blame her."

A NEW JIM TROY NOVELET COMING SOON

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DEATH of a PSYCHIATRIST

A Chillingly Suspenseful Mystery Novelet

by RUTH E. MALONE

THE POLICE CAPTAIN'S voice was grim. "Fine place for a murder —a mental hospital," he said. He stood up, wiped his hands and looked at the doctor inquiringly.

Dr. Craig inclined his head, not trusting himself to speak. Dr. Cox's body lay on the floor of the dimly-lit corridor connecting the two sections of the big hospital. A butcher knife, brand new to judge by its shining handle, protruded several inches from the dead man's back. The body was sprawled out at full length, the fists clenched, the white coat rusty with blood.

"How many suspects do you suppose this gives us, counting all the homicidal impulses you have garrisoned here?"

"Oh, come on now, Captain," Craig said testily, "This is bad enough without your putting such emphasis on the mental angle. The boy was a resident—one of my students. It's a blow to me, and a bad thing for the hospital. But I don't think it helps a bit to pretend that homicidal impulses are confined to mental hospitals. A lot of our patients are better able to control themselves than a good many uncertified citizens walking around outside."

"We'll see, Doctor, we'll see." Captain Stevenson grunted, and turned to walk upstairs to the offices. Then he turned and asked Craig, "Care to come along? If this kid was a student of yours you may be able to give us some helpful information."

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The young doctor was arrogant at times and difficult to get along with. And everyone on the hospital staff knew that he was unhappily married. But that hardly explained why a butcher knife should have been found protruding from his back . . . in an institution which sternly stood guard over all sharp instruments.

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Craig looked past him to Harold Amundsen, the superintendent who was signaling wildly with his eyes. A mountain of work lay on Craig's desk. It was past ten o'clock and he suddenly remembered that he should have called home long ago.

"I'll be glad to answer any questions I can," he said courteously, and the Captain's leathery face relaxed a little. But he still wore a troubled frown and his manner remained slightly brusque.

"We're not actually trying to *pin* anything on your hospital, or on your patients, Doctor," he told the younger man as they ascended the stairs. "It's natural enough for you, I suppose, to think otherwise. But it's just a job to us. Only . . . we can't afford to overlook any possibility. And when you get a bunch of disturbed people all in one place —well, it's almost too easy to see how one of the more disturbed ones could pick up a butcher knife and commit murder. Outside, now, you look for motive. In here . . ." He stopped, letting the words trail off.

Craig held the door of Amundsen's office open and followed him in. Then, keeping his voice level, he replied, "You'd need motive here, too—though you might have to look for it in ways the police aren't used to. However—that knife isn't from the hospital."

"How do you know?"

"Too new," Craig said. "We haven't bought any new kitchen equipment in a long time. Did you notice how shiny the blade was?"

"Shiny's right." The Captain sat down in Amundsen's chair, pulled out a drawer and rested his legs. "Too new for fingerprints. But how can you be sure some cook didn't buy a new knife for your kitchens?"

"I check on the housekeeping expenditures; it's part of my job."

"And nobody on the kitchen payroll could've purchased a new knife without your permission?"

"No. He'd be in trouble if he did. *Somebody* could have brought one in; I'll have to give you that. But it wasn't part of the hospital's equipment."

"All right, all right. We'll look over those records a little later, if you don't mind. Now—how are we going to check all the—how many is it?—four hundred patients in the two buildings? Any way of knowing where they'd all be at—" he glanced at his notebook—"between six and about eight-thirty p.m.?"

"The chief residents in the two buildings, and the head nurse keep close tabs on all visitors. Quietly, you understand. But it would be difficult for a patient to slip into one of the wards unobserved."

"Call 'em."

Amundsen reached for the phone and asked for Dr. Bruff, Dr. Collins and Miss Mazarin. Stevenson went back to studying

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his notes, and Craig returned to his own thoughts.

He had last seen Al Cox that morning, at *Halfway Mark,* the small luncheonette which catered to doctors, nurses and patients alike. Cox had been drinking coffee with a group of his colleagues; and he had been very much alive —and quite disputatious about it —at the time.

A short, stocky young man, he had had a kind of rude vigor and an arrogant swagger which made other people react strongly to him, both pro and con. He was obviously angry at the time, and though Craig had his own problems on his mind he had overheard most of the exchange.

He had been in *Halfway* himself to drink strong black coffee and get back on his feet after the morning battle with his nine o'clock patient an analysand with a singularly irritating habit of misquoting Freud—or using him as a bludgeon.

For a moment, wistfully, Craig had considered again the possibility of giving up patients and concentrating wholly on teaching. Then, remembering the four girls at home, the fifth child on the way, and Marianne's shining certainty that this one would be a boy, he had smiled in spite of himself. Patients provided the bread and cheese; and teaching, under present economic conditions, had to be for love—or its next door neighbor. No, he would have to steel himself to the continued dueling. If only, he thought, they would either read a lot less about psychoanalysis—or a great deal more. He added another spoonful of sugar, and was aware of voices rising behind him.

"We can't come, I tell you." Cox's voice had an extra edge to it. "We won't be making the social circuit for a while. Vicki's going to have another baby."

Van Diver's light voice answered him. "Vicki is? All by herself, Al?," and laughed.

"You know damn well what I mean," Cox was savage.

It made young Dr. Smith sound particularly tactless, then, when he looked up from his magazine and commented, "Another baby? How'd that happen?"

There was an embarrassed silence, broken by Cox. "We didn't know it was loaded," he snarled, and rose to leave the room.

Meredith and the others had also gotten up quickly and were exchanging embarrassed glances.

"Back to the wards for me, fellows," one of the young doctors said.

"Anybody going over to Fernworth with me?"

They divided, half going to Fernworth and half remaining at Hartwood, the main building. As they were leaving, however, Kay Ballard the young social worker from the Children's Wing, came in.

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Craig was not the only one who noticed that Cox, catching her eye, returned again to the table, and that she quickly joined him with her cup of coffee.

II

MISS MAZARIN PINPOINTED Miss Ballard, too. But Craig was both amused and surprised to find that the head nurse entrusted her suspicions to his ears alone, by-passing the inquiring police officer entirely. Accustomed to her stony dislike of physicians in any stage of development, he was unprepared for her even more virulent dislike of men outside the profession. Her answers to Captain Stevenson's questions were as starchily correct as her uniform.

It was not until Stevenson had dismissed all of them, Craig, Miss Mazarin, Amundsen and the two discomposed chief residents, that he found himself alone with the embattled chief nurse.

She followed him, rustling protestingly, to his small office at the far end of the corridor. Anxious to call home, Craig found himself placed instead in the position of confidant. He did not know whether to laugh or to remain sober. He was very tired and the situation was sticky and disagreeable. Moreover, his wife would be worried about him by now. Still, to find himself being consulted instead of patronized by Miss Mazarin, was an experience he was not wholly prepared to bypass. He regarded her steadily as she began.

"Doctor." It had the sound of an order.

"Yes, Miss Mazarin? What is it? I really should phone my wife, but if you'll make it brief—"

"There is something you should know. About Dr. Cox, I mean."

"Perhaps, if you think it is important, you should have told Captain Stevenson."

She shook her head firmly. "No. No policeman for me, thank you. They don't care what kind of reputation the hospital gets."

And you do, he thought, with just a touch of bitterness. You care one hell of a lot. That must be why we all fall short of your ideal.

She went on, ignoring his slightly reproachful frown. "None of the patients is mixed up in this thing, Doctor. This is a personal thing." Her lips narrowed disapprovingly. "It's a bad thing. But I'm not going to have one of my patients taking the blame for it. Not when I know —when everybody around here knows—precisely what was going on."

"What was going on, Miss Mazarin?"

"Doctor Cox and Miss Ballard —were behaving outrageously," she said, her color rising. "What's more, they had a nasty little fight, right in *Halfway Mark,* only this morning. You don't have to take my word for it; you can ask Vi.

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She can tell you all about it. So can anybody within fifty feet of the place at the time."

Vi, he thought. Vi worked behind the counter at *Halfway,* but she waited on customers only in accordance with some strict order of precedence known to herself alone. One of the high-priced consulting doctors with expensive offices up front might possibly catch her eye, and have his order immediately taken, with a deferential smile. Staff doctors were occasionally accommodated—residents very rarely. Patients were left to the less efficient care of Vi's two assistants. The rest of the time Vi spent collecting for possible future reference the gossip and scuttlebut of the huge edifice. Craig was certain that if anybody knew anything that was "going on", it would be Vi. He nodded, without comment.

"I don't want to say anything about a dead man," went on Miss Mazarin, saying it just the same. "But this thing wasn't even decent —the way they didn't ever try to hide it, or anything. A divorce they were talking about, Doctor, and everybody heard them. And they heard him saying that it was out of the question and that she might as well forget it. The things she said to him a moment later weren't exactly professional, or ladylike even, if you know what I mean."

Miss Mazarin looked at Craig and then raised her eyes to the picture over his head. "I think she was blazing mad. And I think you ought to ask her where she was when he got that knife in his back."

"Why didn't you give this information to the police?"

She sniffed. "I don't think it's any of their business, that's why. If we're going to have trouble in the hospital, I say it's the hospital's affair to straighten it out. Those police—they think my patients are all loonies." She used the word as though it were a large rough stone that she had to swallow.

"They think all these poor sick people are just waiting for an opportunity to kill people or cause trouble. Well, they've got a lot to learn, Doctor. There are more so-called sane people on the outside waiting to get into trouble than you'll ever find in here."

He met her eye; and for the first time in his seven years at the hospital an exchange of warmth and understanding took place between them.

"I couldn't agree more with you as to that, Miss Mazarin," he said. "I'll talk to Miss Ballard myself, the first thing in the morning. I don't think there's anything to it," he hastened to add. "Miss Ballard has a quick temper but I don't think she's capable of killing a man. But I can't believe any of the patients here did it, either."

She almost thawed, closing the door behind her.

Nevertheless he was troubled,

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all that night and the next morning. Kay Ballard was quick, tempermental, and very pretty. She also had a highly trained mind and a great deal of self-discipline—putting aside affairs of the heart. She might be capable of a great many interesting things, but hardly of murder. But who. . . ?

His mind went back effortlessly to a day six months before— a day when he had returned from his coffee break at *Halfway* to find his office a shambles. His name plate had been ripped off the door, seemingly by someone in a fit of violent anger. Inside his papers lay scattered across the rug, a few ripped into shreds, the rest crumpled past recovery. A photograph of his children lay on the floor, the letters on the desk had been rifled and his keys were gone. Staring at the mess, unable to comprehend it, he had finally noticed a scrawled red-crayon message on the blotter.

"This will teach you," the message read in shaking script. "I told you I wanted another Doctor. I hate him. And I hate you too."

And he had remembered—Margot Gillingham. She had been an outpatient at the clinic, recommended by a private-patient social agency which had been unable to cope any further with her case. As chief of the residents' training program he had assigned her to Dr. Cox; and their difficulties had been immense and discouraging from the beginning.

Cox had conferred with him, his face grim, after nearly every session. Craig had been intrigued, however, with the particular quality of her hostility, and he had desperately wanted to get on with the case.

But Miss Gillingham finally strode into Dr. Craig's office, and demanded another doctor, her voice quivering hysterically.

"He *hates* me, do you hear? He hates me and he fights me every step. I'll do something desperate if you don't get me another doctor. You understand, don't you? There has to be a change."

Craig nodded, soothingly, and tried to draw her out. But she could only go on repeating that Dr. Cox hated her. After conferring with Cox, Craig decided that they should try to work the problem out together. Refusing to do anything drastic would be better for both the doctor and the patient. She had retaliated with the vicious attack on Craig's own office—and had never come back.

I wonder, he thought. It was *my* office she wrecked. But could she have been angry enough at Cox to murder him—angry still, half a year later?

He picked up the phone and called Stevenson, giving him the girl's address and the particulars of the case. That hard-pressed official, glad to find somebody in the hundreds of potential suspects who might possibly furnish a motive,

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promised to get on it right away.

Craig was hanging up when Kay Ballard walked into his office.

"I didn't do it, Bill," she said. She lit a cigarette with shaking fingers, but her voice was firm.

"I didn't think you did," he replied, returning her level gaze with reassuring candor. "But people heard you quarreling yesterday, and you know what a violent quarrel can suggest. People talk, Kay, in a place like this. You know that." He sighed and gazed out the window.

Her face reddened slightly. "They'd talk just the same, whether we'd had our fight out loud or in private. At least we didn't hide around corners and sneak our meetings."

She sounded angry and infinately sad at the same time. "We were fighting about a divorce, if that's what you wanted to know. About how there wasn't going to be one. But it wasn't an ultimatum. I'd have gone on seeing him, just the same. And he knew it. It was just one of those damn stinking things that sometimes happen. I fought with him at the top of my voice. I didn't realize my quarrel was going to be held against me in a murder investigation." She ground out her half-finished cigarette and burst suddenly into tears.

Craig went to a cabinet, found a glass and a pill, and brought them back to her.

"Take this. It will make you feel better. Now then. You and Dr. Cox were talking very seriously about a divorce, was that it?"

She nodded.

"And he said it was impossible. He was telling some of the other residents this morning that he and Vicki were going to have another baby. Did you know that?"

She nodded, her lips tight.

"And last night somebody killed him."

"They should have killed his wife," she said flatly. "She had no understanding. She rode him unmercifully. Some of the women you doctors marry when you're going through med school . . ." She was frankly contemptuous. "Then you get a little older and you see what a mess you've made of your lives, and it's too late. Well, I can tell you this. I felt like committing cold-blooded murder yesterday. But I would never have murdered Al. I'd have murdered Vicki. And I still would—if I were capable of killing anyone."

She tried to smile, but the effort merely twisted her lips grotesquely. "I'll tell the nice policeman all about it, Bill. Don't worry. But you can take it from me. I didn't kill him. I wouldn't have killed him. I'd have done a lot of things with him, but not that."

And she walked out.

III

IT PROVED TO BE a long day,

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rough on Craig's nerves. The newspapers had a field day. Murder in a mental hospital was exactly what they'd needed for a slack season between Cold War pronouncements and they took full advantage of it.

There were diagrams of the hospital; which, admittedly, was something that lent itself to a mystery-fiction type treatment. But it's one of the oldest in the United States, Craig reminded himself. What do they expect—the Lever Building? The red-brick edifice rambled through five buildings and over eleven acres, all told, and it had been supplied by some nineteenth century architectural genius with underground corridors which might have come straight out of a Gothic novel. And the murder victim was a sympathetic figure in the eyes of the public. A poor boy, who'd worked his way through medical school against impossible odds. A pregnant wife, devastated by the blow. Their four children, at home with Grandmother when the blow fell.

It revolted and at the same time kept alive a nagging kind of persistence in Craig's mind. Somewhere there's some connection, he thought. There has to be. Something will fall into place alongside of something else and produce the answer. But I don't think it will be a psychotic patient with a butcher knife. He felt very determined and stubborn about that.

At four p.m. Captain Stevenson phoned him. The police officer was, for a change, genial, if not downright amused.

"Dr. Craig, I'm thinking seriously of putting two of my men to work guarding your life," he said.

Craig sighed. "You've talked to Margot Gillingham?" he asked.

"That's right. And she says she didn't do it but she wishes she had. And she'd very much like to kill you, too, if she can find a convenient time."

"I'm sure of it. But where was she when it happened?"

It was Stevenson's turn to sigh. "Over in New Jersey with a flock of relatives and friends—at a beer party. There's a girl who shouldn't be allowed near anything alcoholic. Just the same there are so many witnesses we're having difficulty combing them out of our hair. No possible chance she could have got away. Anyway . . . you know something?"

"What?"

"I dont think she's the killing type at all. As you head-shrinkers would say—she just hasn't got the right psychological equipment to carry it off."

"Right you are, Captain. A good diagnosis. She might have tortured him to death by screaming at him but she never would have killed him deliberately. You'd make a pretty good psychologist."

Stevenson grunted. "When you have a vacancy down there, let me

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know. I practice a little of the stuff every day. Anyway, that's about done. You have any other ideas?"

Craig hesitated. Half formed, in his mind, there smouldered an idea. Nevertheless it was more curiosity than suspicion.

"Not right now," he said. "But I'll keep trying. When I get a bright idea I'll let you know."

There were other pressing problems to take care of, and they were not long in developing kinks. Marianne called about one minute to six, just as Craig was thinking thankfully of home, dinner, and a drink.

"Bill?" Her voice had the high, light quality he associated with suppressed excitement. "Don't come home. I'll meet you down at the University Hospital."

"You mean right now?" He could'nt quite believe it, although it had happened three times before. "Are you all right, Marianne?"

"I'm fine," she assured him. "Marvelous. I have a cab. Mrs. Beasley's here and will stay until you get home. The girls are getting supper and we're all ready for the big event. So just keep calm. I'll see you in half an hour."

She blew him a kiss and hung up before he could answer.

Before he could get out of the office, though, Amundsen was in. Badly shaken by the lack of developments and enraged with the newspapers because of their holiday treatment of the crime, Amundsen queried him about the probability of Cox's assailant being among the patients. And, if so, what possible measures could be taken to uncover the culprit, aside from waiting for a confession.

"It shouldn't be hard to get a confession," Craig assured him. "Any disturbed neurotic or psychotic will look for punishment soon after committing an act of violence. Confession lightens the burden by relieving guilt feelings. The real danger, as I see it, will be in having a great many patients who did not actually do the murder seek to take the blame. It's natural enough—almost inevitable."

"But Cox himself. I hear stories now. Stories I didn't hear before. What kind of man was he actually?"

Craig paused before answering, fingering the brass letter opener on his desk. What kind of man had Al Cox been?

"There are a lot of different answers to that, sir," he told the superintendent. "I saw him often in the course of my daily rounds. He was sharp, intelligent, eager to succeed. He had—let's call them difficulties. He was a poor boy, to begin with. And he married young, and had a family, at a time when marriage was a burden on his career. With nurses, and sometimes with fellow residents, he could be sharp, or even disagreeable. With the help, he was almost arrogant.

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Miss Mazarin will back me up, I think. But with the patients he was unfailingly a good doctor."

"But Stevenson, that damned policeman, tells me there was one patient who hated him, and who caused you some trouble, too, if I'm not mistaken."

"But the resentment was in her mind, sir, and had nothing to do with Cox really. It was a *transference*. It had nothing at all to do with his behavior toward her. We have a great deal of that to deal with. But, it just doesn't always come out in such violent forms. We tried—I tried—to work it out to a point where the girl could see that the hostility she experienced came from within herself. But she was determined to have another doctor, and she became enraged with me, finally, because she became convinced I was the one who was frustrating her. She would naturally think that in her kind of illness."

Amundsen nodded. "I'm afraid these things are a lot more complicated than the police will believe; or want to believe. The thing I fear, Dr. Craig, is that in their anxiety to wind this case up, they'll hang it on somebody who is completely innocent. And then it will be weeks and months of trouble for all of us. Not to mention the hospital's reputation, which, in my poor way, I'm concerned to guard."

"I understand only too well," Craig said. "What troubles me especially is this: if one of the patients didn't do it—and I'm virtually certain none of them did—where do we look? It happened right here in the hospital, worse luck for us. And he couldn't have stabbed himself in the back. Was it one of the medical staff? Or a disgruntled nurse? Or an angry cleaning man?"

Amundsen shook his gray head disconsolately, moving at last into the hall. "It's a bad business. I wish I could go home and go to sleep and forget it. You'd better call it a day yourself, Dr. Craig. You could do with some rest."

Craig smiled thinly. "Not tonight, I'm afraid. I'm on my way to the University Hospital. My wife is meeting me there."

"My dear dear boy." The superintendent was abashed. "And I've been holding you up with all this. Go ahead now. Don't keep her waiting." He almost shoved Craig out of the swinging back doors.

"And my best to Mrs. Craig. And to you!" he called warmly. He strode across the parking lot to his car, which was parked near the end of the circle.

IV

MARIANNE WAS NOWHERE in sight when Craig arrived at the University Hospital. Having found a white coat for himself, he looked up Pete Jeffries and engaged in an

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exchange of conversation with the elderly O.B., while both of them drank a quick coffee in the nurses' kitchen. In the course of their talk, Craig remembered that it was quite likely that Mrs. Cox had been under Pete's care and queried the obstetrician.

"That's right," Pete nodded, pouring a second steaming cup for himself. "Brought her in here last night, near collapse. She's just down the hall there. Under sedation."

"Poor girl," Craig sighed. "Sedation can't be used forever. She's going to have a bad time of it, I'm afraid."

"She always does," Jeffries said, unexpectedly, and then looked sidewise at Craig. "Excuse me, me, Bill. I don't mean to appear unsympathetic. But . . . well, let's say she isn't like Marianne; or like ninety percent of my patients for that matter. She fights pregnancy every step of the way. She hates it, and that makes it harder for her, of course. Even during the first few months."

Dr. Jeffries sighed, wiped his hands on a towel and turned back to the corridor. "This will be a bad one, of course. But . . . when anybody feels as sorry for herself as Vicki Cox, I tell you it's damned hard to give her any extra sympathy. You feel as if she's already had her share, and then some. All self-imposed."

"Does she have an especially hard time delivering?" Craig asked, following closely on Jeffries' heels and looking out the window for the cab.

Jeffries shook his head. "Not her. Perfectly simple. It's just that some of them love to feel as if it's a special burden, a kind of personal affront, and they make a real big deal out of it. I've seen . . . but here," his voice quickened with pleasure. "This, I think, is your Little Woman—and looking wonderful."

The two doctors met Marianne as she arrived. She was wearing, Craig noticed with tender amusement, an enormous garden hat and the most beautiful blue maternity smock she had been able to get her hands on. She looked radiant, and she greeted them as though she were hostess at a particularly fashionable party.

"Were you going some place, darling?" Craig took her hands and then leaned over to plant a kiss on her smile.

"Some place special." She squeezed his arm. "I won't be long, either. Pete, if you're ready I wouldn't keep you waiting for the world." She winked, and turned to follow the nurse. Then she walked back a quick step or two and ran her fingers along the lines in Craig's face.

"Take it easy, dear, won't you? I feel wonderful; and you know how it is with me. A picnic. Ask Pete."

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And this time she nearly ran after the nurse.

It wasn't a picnic. Craig had called the girls three times, each time with increasing anxiety, before he was able to say, "It's a boy"—not quite believing it himself. There were ecstatic rumbles at the other end, and finally it was sober, sweet-natured Rosemary who said, "Is Mommy all right? Kiss her for us. I'll get the others to bed. Good night, Daddy," and hung up.

He leaned his head on his hand for a moment, then ran it through his hair, which was damp with sweat, and straightened his tie and went back to the room, where they were making Marianne comfortable. It was past three. Her face was drawn, and pale, but she managed a twinkle when her husband's head appeared in the door.

"Bill?" her voice was close to a whisper. He took her hand, smoothing the fingers, and the nurses rustled out, after opening a window and smoothing the sheet one last time.

"Darling," he answered.

"Bill . . . you don't mind?"

"Mind?" He was aghast.

"Mind the boy, I mean? After all, you've been head man in that little harem of ours for a long time. Now we're going to have another male around the house. And a beauty he is, too," she couldn't resist adding.

Craig had seen the baby, and felt that perhaps this last description was a bit extravagant.

"You're a silly woman." He laid her hand along his cheek. "Of course I mind. Male jealousy, and all that. I'll probably hate him when I see all of you silly females gushing over him, the little monster. But I'll do my best to pretend I'm pleased, for your sake."

She laughed weakly but still like Marianne, and kissed the hair on the back of his hands.

"Bill . . . Bill . . . You're such a darling. Such a total darling. Just imagine the glorious luck; I'm going to have two of you!" She sighed in utter bliss; and was asleep before he had drawn up the sheet and closed the door behind him.

Next morning reaction had set in, and he sat on the side of the bed, considering for a long while the possibility of canceling his appointments for the day and staying home. He felt tired, and old, and now that Marianne was safe, painfully conscious of the struggles of the months ahead. A small baby, again; with all of the nocturnal disorder and daily high crisis such an event implies. I'm past forty, he thought, and some of the old bounce is gone.

Downstairs the girls were fighting in high voices over breakfast chores, and before he had his socks on at least one spell of tears announced that school time must be near. He groaned; he needed a day off, all right. But maybe he'd

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better save it until Marianne and the young squirt came home from the Hospital. There was, also, Miss Nine O'clock to be considered. She was as jealous of her time as she was of her relationships. And it might be better, on the whole, not to give her any excuse for triggering off. For intricate reasons, she was going to be unhappy enough about the new addition.

He restored peace over the oatmeal and outlined a series of chores for the girls to undertake in their Mother's absence with only minor rebellion in the ranks. They were, he reflected as he saw the last and smallest off to school, fine girls. Like their Mother in warmth and quickness and charm; and perhaps, just a little like him in clinging to an old situation until the last possible second. They made the school bus by a hair's breadth apiece.

The circles under his eyes came in for a good deal of comment, and he was still receiving congratulations—and feeling some pleasure that at least there was another topic of conversation for the staff besides Cox's death—when nine o'clock arrived. His patient was tense, this morning, in response to God only knew what inward pressures, and he felt a little sorry, considering his own weariness, that he had not canceled. Still, here she was, and they had better make the most of it.

He had not been wrong. It was a rough session; one of the roughest he had ever taken part in with her. Partly, he supposed, because of his own weariness; partly because of something she caught from him and then transferred back again. But she spent nearly all of the fifty minutes berating him, in a high, unnatural childlike voice, not running over with violence but under a strange and defeating control. In a diminishing order of precedence she took apart his personal idiosyncrasies, his supposed crimes against her person, and the furnishings of his small room.

She disliked what she regarded as the disorder; she disapproved of the pictures for their preponderance of sea themes and she complained about the reading matter. A lot of it, of course, was repetition and embroidery from before. But he was noting the peculiar intensity of the attack, (she had complained, too, that his automatic pen was noisy and distracting) when there was a laden pause.

He paused, also, his pen waiting above the notebook and his mind alert to something coming. Then, her voice not changing but growing wary all the same, said with considerable scorn, "Psychiatrists. The whole breed of you." When he failed to answer the baited contempt there was another pause and then she rushed on, "If I were your wife I'd kill you." And when he failed to answer

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that, repeated, "Did you hear me? I said if I were married to you, I'd murder you."

His pen, which had stopped, moved on, and he thought, of course. The wish—and went on writing. But another part of his mind, suddenly awake, walked off and stood thinking, thinking.

She left, finally and tearfully, after his firm, "Tomorrow morning, then," and Craig walked back to his desk. He was sweating and vaguely excited. He thought for a moment, and then called Miss Cadbury.

"Martha? Dr. Craig. Be a good girl and cancel my other hours for today, won't you? Yes, yes. Thank you very much. Yes, we're delighted to have a boy. Yes, she's fine. Thank you."

He sighed, and put his head in his hands for a moment. Then he went to the washroom, doused his face in cold water and straightened his tie.

V

ON THE MATERNITY floor at University, Dr. Craig paused. By turning right, he could see Marianne, see the baby, have a restful interval before the thing he knew he must do. Paused only for a moment, however; and then turned left.

Vicki Cox was lying in bed, in a room which had been heavily darkened against the expressed orders of the charge nurse. Her eyes were swollen indecently, her face puffed and her whole manner a strange combination of bitter grief and angry resentment. When she recognized Craig she began to weep again, noisily.

He sat beside the bed, waiting for her to stop. Then, "I'm sorry, Vicki. How are you feeling?"

"Terrible. Terrible," she sobbed. "How could this awful thing *happen* to me? What's the matter down there, that they can't control the patients? Don't you have any supervision? This is an awful thing."

"Yes, it is," he said in tight control. "Where are the children, Vicki?"

She looked at him, arrested for a moment from her orgy of weeping. "With my mother. We sent them up a week ago; when I found out I was going to . . . going to . . ." she couldn't go on, and buried her face in a corner of the sheet.

"Yes, yes, I know." He looked down at the tips of his shoes, considering, and then without looking up he said quietly in the best therapeutic voice he had, "Why did you do it, Vicki?" and when she did not answer, still without looking at her, "Because he asked for a divorce?"

For a terrible minute she laughed. He couldn't help looking up then, startled at the outburst. She lay with her head back on the

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pillow, as out of control as before, but in a different way. Then she stopped abruptly, and gave him a hostile, scornful stare.

"Divorce? Al Cox would never have divorced me. He knew that, even when he asked me for it. The only person who didn't know it was Kay Ballard, the little fool. No matter what any other woman had, or could give him, he owed me too much to go through with any divorce. He hated me, Dr. Craig. But he never would have been able to forget those rotten poverty-stricken years I spent with him, in filthy little apartments, pregnant all the time. Keeping the kids quiet so he could study; taking the kids out to a park so he could cram for exams. Eating wheat germ and two-day-old bread so he could pay his fees. If I had given him a divorce he wouldn't have taken it. He couldn't. Too much guilt on his conscience."

She stopped, and Craig forbore to reply. Then, she went on, in a low, singsong voice that was more frightening than either her weeping or her laughter, "No, it wasn't the divorce. We'd stop talking about that three days before. It was about—me. He hated the way I took my pregnancy. He hated the way I cried all the time. He hated the way the apartment looked. He hated the fact that I never entertained, like the other doctors' wives. He hated the fact the kids always had buttons off and wore unmatched socks. He hated the way I cooked, and finally, that morning, he stood up to cut himself a slice of bread, and yelled because the knife wouldn't cut. He said we never had anything that worked in the house, not even a decent knife. And he stomped out."

She stopped, looked at Craig under dark lashes, and as he settled into silence went on: "I felt pretty bad. This was what you might call a normal enough morning, for us. It's been that way, I don't know, seven or eight years now. But when he left I didn't have anything to do. I piled up the breakfast dishes. I missed the kids. Funny. If they'd been there I'd have taken it out on them, but they weren't and I missed them.

"I went out. Oh, sometime, I don't know—maybe ten or eleven o'clock. I felt mad about the things he'd said. But I wanted to prove he was wrong, some way. I wandered down to Sears. Bought some curtains. Bought a cushion for the couch. I don't know, random things, sort of. And bought a butcher knife. A new, shiny knife with a sharp edge."

This time Craig ventured, softly, "And?"

"And I came down here to see him; to talk to him. No; no. First I went to a movie some place. And stopped and got some coffee. I felt light-headed. And then, I knew he had duty that night. But I thought I'd try to catch him after he fin-

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ished supper. I came down and walked in, the back way. Nobody saw me. I had my bag in my arm. Al's office was open, and I went in. I knew he'd come back there before he went on duty, to smoke or to make a call. And when he came in there I was.

"I came down to make peace with him. That's funny, isn't it? But we got to quarreling again. Finally he said he had to get to work, and walked out. I followed him down to the underground corridor. He was on his way to the other building. I didn't mean to follow him. I knew how mad it would make him. But I'd started to cry again. And finally he turned around and sneered, 'Go away, go away, will you? Why don't you try talking to me some time when you aren't crying?' "

She gave a long, long sigh, and sank back into the pillow. "I felt like firecrackers going off in my head. He turned his back. And it was easy. Easier than you'd think. He didn't expect it, and he fell with no more than you'd call a little grunt. I looked at him for a minute, looked at all that blood starting. And then I turned around, and walked upstairs and through the front lobby and out the door. I'm surprised nobody mentioned seeing me. I must have seen half a dozen people. And I came home, and made some coffee. I'd begun to cry, again—a long time before the phone rang."

Her voice died, and she closed her eyes, her mouth drawn down in the clear-etched lines of self pity. Craig waited, watching her for a minute, and when she did not go on reached for the telephone, his hand shaking a little.

A NEW COMPLETE MIKE SHAYNE NOVEL NEXT MONTH

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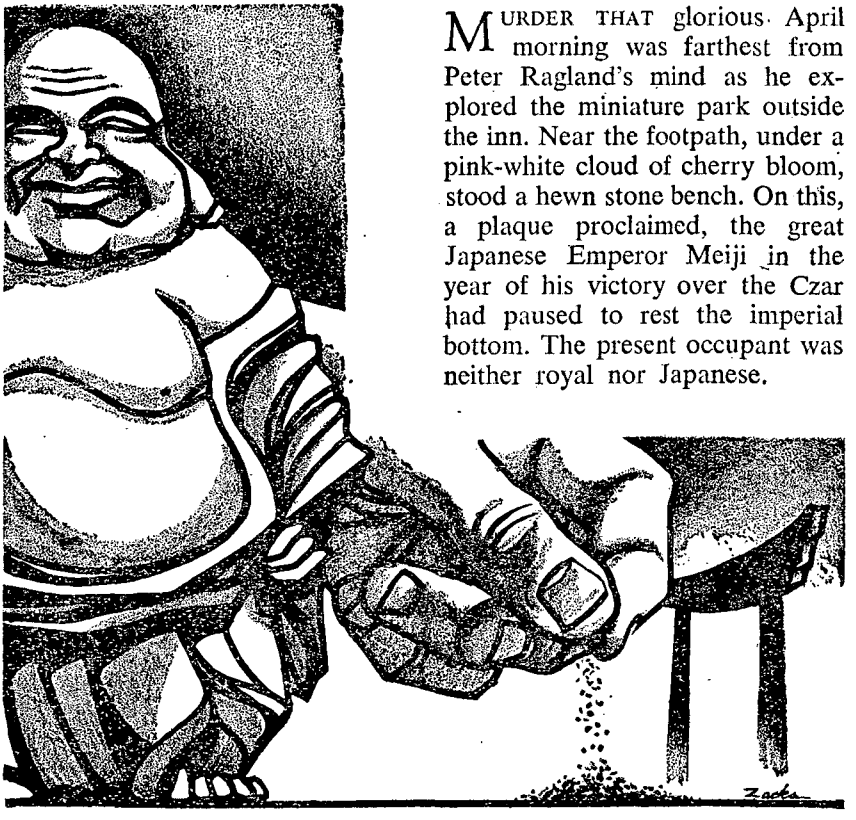
THE TOY-HEAD MAN

by FRANKLIN GREGORY

The murder was toyland strange. And Japanese customs made it stranger still.



MURDER THAT glorious April morning was farthest from Peter Ragland's mind as he explored the miniature park outside the inn. Near the footpath, under a pink-white cloud of cherry bloom, stood a hewn stone bench. On this, a plaque proclaimed, the great Japanese Emperor Meiji in the year of his victory over the Czar had paused to rest the imperial bottom. The present occupant was neither royal nor Japanese.

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He was, the approaching Peter observed with dismay, a fellow countryman. He was plump. He was of middle age and conservative dress. And for all the festive scene about him, he presented a picture of woe as he stared bleakly across the valley at the distant splendor of Mt. Fuji. In his lap rested a small carton and its torn wrapping of bright paper.

Not until Peter was nearly upon him did this dejected man glance up, and then with a start. If he seemed about to withdraw his gaze, he reconsidered; perhaps because of Peter's manifest American look; perhaps because of inner need.

"Oh," he said uncertainly, "was that you singing in the bath this morning?"

Peter's frown was almost perceptible. At this remote inn, with its kimonaed maids and sliding doors of paper and wood, he'd hoped to enjoy just one holiday without tangling in the affairs of others.

Still, he mustered the civility to assent. "If you're kind enough to call it that."

"You carry a good tenor," the man acknowledged. "But damn if I see what you had to sing about. Confounded Jap bath's too all-fired hot. And privacy! Isn't there any privacy in this wretched country?"

Peter, who did not think Japan at all wretched, replied: "Not very much. It's pretty crowded, you know."

He had the feeling the man was avoiding some more vexing problem.

"It's worse than Times Square," the stranger complained. "Hang it! Here I was soaking when this female traipsed in, dropped her kimona—stark naked, mind—and started soaping herself calm as you please. What are these people, immoral heathens?"

There was perplexity as well as anger in the question. Peter suppressed a grin.

"Oh, no. Amoral, perhaps. It's just—well, to her you didn't exist. And she imagined she didn't exist for you."

The stranger's gray eyes lost some of their bleakness. "What kind of make-believe is that?" he demanded. "Can't they face up to reality?"

Peter hesitated. It was always difficult to explain the Japanese character to Americans; especially to successful American businessmen who stood for no nonsense.

"Not reality as we know it," he said. "But they're very good at seeing what isn't there." As the man frowned, Peter added: "Look at it this way. They've spent centuries under harsh, suspicious masters. So naturally they've built up defenses —with evasion, deceit, Noh masks, what-have you—until now it's second nature. They don't expect anybody to tell the truth."

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The man leaned forward, his veined hands gripping the edge of the bench.

"Good God!" And half to himself, hoarsely: "I wonder—was that why John was killed?"

Peter stared at him. But the story, front-paged in the Tokyo press the day he arrived from Taiwan, had carried the dateline of an obscure village he hadn't recognized. He said quietly: "Then you're John Porter's father?"

The other, still possessed by his thought, nodded abstractedly. "Henry Porter, yes."

When he spoke again, it was not to say anything remarkable; hardly more than the papers had printed. But in the jettisoned words, Peter got an impression of man baffled and confused, fighting for self-control.

"Toys," he said. "But John—in the Occupation, y'know, Marine captain—liked Japan and wanted to open our own plant here." His jaw set, reflecting original displeasure. "It's over in the next village. Happy Delight, it's called. Ha! But back home of course we're Porter Play. Perhaps you've heard of us."

As who hadn't, Peter thought. In the front rank of toymakers, Porter Play, along with Marx and Gilbert. Vaguely he recalled a mention in LIFE last Christmas—something to do with dolls.

He ticked off what the stories had said: John Porter, 27, strangled, neck broken, found in a ravine not far from the factory. Last seen by his young wife, Minerva, leaving their home on an unannounced errand at nine the preceding evening. Mr. Porter had flown out right away; sent the body and the young wife home only last Sunday.

"A man was arrested," Peter said.

"Tanizaki Hajime," said Mr. Porter. "The superintendent. Of course he denied it, but he won't say where he was. But he wasn't home." He added surprisingly: "A likable little cuss when John brought him to the States last year to learn our methods. And quite a lady's man. Damn if I see him doing it. John was as big as you."

He appraised Peter's six feet of elastic strength with approval. "Still," he added, "I'm told they all learned judo in the Nip army. And if he took John by surprise—"

Peter said nothing. He had his own views, gained from enough college boxing and battle combat, about a good big man being better than a good little one. But John Porter may not have been a good big one.

"And I'd had such great hopes for him. I was retiring soon. Now, well, I guess I got to take over and save what I can."

He seemed tired, very tired.

"I've been over there twice. Never saw such a mess. Production way off, which might be nat-

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ural enough with one boss dead and the other in jail. But I think I know a calculated slowdown when I see one. And there was that strike last summer." He added hastily: "Not over wages. We pay well enough."

"Who's in charge now?"

"The oyabun. I guess you know what an oyabun is. A union leader."

Peter glanced sharply at Mr. Porter. Was it possible he did not know, or John hadn't reported, that an oyabun was so much more?

"Big fellow named Morita Ton," Mr. Porter was saying, and now a faint bell sounded in Peter's memory. He was sure the name had not been connected with labor circles.

He was still trying to place it when Mr. Porter, with a snort of savage disgust, said: "Then, just this morning, this came!"

Lifting the carton from his lap, he removed the lid. Revealed was a plastic Danjuro doll—fat and egg-shaped, the sort with weighted bottom which, when tipped over, bobs up again. Some four inches high, its body was painted to represent an exotic costume of the popular Kabukiza theatre.

Peter remembered a silly Japanese joke which labeled some geishas Danjuro because they were push-overs. Then he noticed that this doll was not of traditional type. Instead of being sealed at the stomach where the halves joined, the two half-eggs screwed together. Even more radical was the departure in the face. Instead of Danjuro's, the famous actor, the expression was outrageously comic: squint-eyes, mouth drawn at one corner in a leer which, for all its grotesquery, yielded a tender human appeal.

"Porter Play's Best-Seller." That was how LIFE had described it.

"Only damn thing in normal production," Mr. Porter grunted. "But that's not the point." Lifting the doll from its box he touched the head. It had been twisted off, then taped back at a crooked angle to appear as a broken neck. In the box was an unsigned warning: *Mr Poter go hom.*

Peter whistled softly. Unconsciously, Mr. Porter was massaging his throat. At last he said: "I'm no coward. I was in war myself in Seventeen. But when you come up against something you don't understand, that's when you worry. And you can't do a blame thing. I'd already the queerest feeling I wasn't welcome. In my own plant, mind! But until this came I thought it just could be my imagination. Strange land, and forced to depend on an interpreter who might or mightn't be reliable." He eyed Peter with speculation. "Say, didn't I hear you talking Jap to the maids?"

This, Peter recognized, was an oblique invitation. And far from resenting it, he smiled at his own self-deception in thinking that ever

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he could survive a quiet holiday. Truth was, he sensed a much more extraordinary story than had yet appeared in print.

"Oh, yes," he said comfortably, "I know Japanese. It's a rather chameleon language, quite like the people and loaded with double meanings. If I could be of help—" He produced his card.

Most strangers, on learning Peter Ragland's identity as the famous foreign correspondent for the North newspapers, were properly impressed. It was possible Mr. Porter was, too, but sheer relief outweighed his curiosity.

"Would you?" he said, the worry receding before a pathetically eager smile. "Would you really? You can't know what it would mean—another American who knows the score back-stopping me."

The drove, in Mr. Porter's company sedan and at Peter's wish, to the National Rural Police jail where Tanizaki Hajime was held.

"Though I don't see what good it can do," Mr. Porter objected, parking the car. "I was here myself, you know, and he wouldn't even see me. Sent out word he hated our guts."

He switched off the ignition. "A fine thing, after all John did for him. The trip to America, good job, good pay, bonus at New Year's, favors for his family. Damnit! How can a man be so thankless as that? And yet it's just the reason the police think he killed John."

"The hate?" Peter had his hand on the door handle.

"More what led up to the hate. Because he'd done so well with us. They said John was Tanizaki's '*on*-man.' Now what sort of stuff is that?"

Peter relaxed in the seat. This would take some explaining.

"Have you ever," he asked, "heard of Lafcadio Hearn?"

"Writer fellow who married a Nip? Oh yes."

"It was his idea that to understand these people you have to learn to think all over again; backward, upside down, inside out."

"Hmph. I'll buy that."

"But perhaps John did'nt," Peter said. "Or he'd have been less likely to heap favors on Tanizaki. You see, they're an abnormally sensitive lot. They think that when they're born they inherit a stupendous debt from the past—to their ancestors, parents, the whole world. Then, as they go through life, these debts increase—to teachers, friends, employer, whoever helps them along. No such thing as a self-made man in Japan. Life's a joint enterprise."

"Ha?" Mr. Porter, as a self-made man himself, scoffed at a concept so utterly alien.

"These debts are *on*,' Peter continued. "And to be a really virtuous man, you have to spend your life sacrificing everything you'd rather

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do to pay back. So naturally when somebody comes along and does you a gratuitous favor, as John did, it's that much more load to repay and you resent it."

"My stars! You don't mean it could reach the point of murder?"

"It's a pretty terrible thing," Peter said thoughtfully, "when a Japanese at last realizes he can never pay off. It's loss of face, end of the line. *On* is their guiding force. Debt. Burden. Sacrifice. You owe. You owe it to your name, for instance, to keep it spotless. That's why it's a Japanese virtue to revenge insult. And one insult is to be given something you can't pay back.

"Tied in with that is the fact you're not supposed to change stations in life. You owe it to your name to stay put. So it's just possible that, besides feeling insulted, Tanizaki figured he was getting above himself and blamed John for it."

An austere old man in black kimona, with the thinning white beard and high black skull cap of a patriarch, appeared from the jail and walked slowly down the steps. On seeing the company car, he paused in recognition and a fierce expression darkened his face. Then, abruptly, he turned and moved off.

"Tanizaki's father," Mr. Porter said. "Damnit! I can sure feel for him!"

Peter watched the old man out of sight. He had seen the type often —hard-bitten traditionalists who ruled their families with an iron fist, picking wives for the sons and husbands for the daughters.

"Tanizaki lives with him? Of course. It's the *on* he owes. And because of it, he must always obey his father's every wish."

Mr. Porter was incredulous. "A grown man like Tanizaki? It must drive these people nuts."

Peter was grinning as he stepped out of the car. "Yes, but like everywhere else, there are always backsliders."

He recalled his little lesson a few minutes later when Tanizaki, gravely accepting a cigarette, murmured "Arigato." One of the innumerable terms for "thank you," but it also meant: "How difficult for me to become indebted to you for this; I am ashamed."

Peter knew that; the solemn-faced Tanizaki also must be desperately ashamed of being under arrest. Haji, this shame was, a far greater punishment than death itself. For in death, there was nothing; finis, no hell, no heaven. But the shame was now and lay heavily on his honor.

Which was why Tanizaki's reaction surprised Peter when he urged: "But why not say where you were that night?"

Six unaccounted hours, for from the factory Tanizaki had not reached home till midnight.

"Odawara?" suggested Peter.

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"Maybe you have a geisha in Odawara?"

After all, if a prosperous young Japanese wanted to keep a geisha, who cared? But Tanizaki merely stared at the cell wall.

"Don't you know," Peter persisted, "that it would be so much easier if you explained where you were?"

"Then I would be let free," Tanizaki said.

"Certainly, if you proved you were somewhere else."

"In such case, no, I stay here," Tanizaki said flatly. Was there a glint of fear in those dark, slanted eyes? Fear so strong of something on the outside that it compelled him to accept the shame of arrest? Unable to penetrate the expressionless mask of this young Oriental face, Peter—quite in Japanese fashion—approached the problem sideways.

"You don't think for a moment I believe that you, a modern Japanese, would kill John-san just because he was your *on*-man?"

For the first time, Tanizaki showed interest. "Ah, so?" he said in English. "You know *on*?"

"Of course I know *on*," Peter replied. "Im no dumb Amerika-jin. And I know you're an honorable man. And of course you were upset because you didn't think you could ever repay John-san. But listen! There are other ways of repaying."

Tanizaki's mood seemed to alter with establishment of this first suggestion of rapport.

"Ah, so?" Tanizaki said again. What he was really asking, and what he was too proud to utter, was: "How?"

"By telling what you know."

This was a new concept to Tanizaki, repaying gifts of substance with something so insubstantial as information. And yet this American who seemed to understand Japan said it was true. There was relief in his voice when he said: "John-san insult me."

Thunder! Was he really trying to cook his goose?

"John-san refuse my advice," Tanizaki went on. "I say no, not hire the man. But there was strike, and he hire him."

"What man?"

Tanizaki put his fist to his mouth.

"I say too much. No more, thank you, please." Again the glint of fear in his eyes, and nothing Peter could say would move him. Still, as he was leaving the cell, Tanizaki spoke once more.

"I think," he said, "the devil get in after all."

Not till they reached the factory and passed through the gate did Peter catch the significance of Tanizaki's remark.

"What a confounded time John had building it!" Mr. Porter growled, glaring at the long, one-story building. "You see where the well house is? On the south, though

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the American engineer insisted there was a better water supply to the west."

"Oh, yes," smiled Peter, "the south is the Prosperity side."

"So John wrote. But what's worse, the building itself should face northeast for easier access to the road. But when John objected, the contractor refused. Said if a building fronts northeast, it lets in the devil. If you ask me—"

Peter chuckled. "Just what Tanizaki meant."

They entered the plant by a wide door at the receiving platform and came into a room stocked with metal and plywood, fabric and paint—the raw stuff of the Santa Claus business. But it was a queer collection of Santas helpers they found in the assembly shop farther on where some three hundred plump, round-faced girls in Hollywood slacks stood sullenly at long benches.

Stalled completely was a production line of toy bulldozers and fire trucks; while no battle of childish imagination would ever have gotten won were it forced to depend on the flagging output of Porter Play's jet fighters and tanks. Only the line producing the Danjuro dolls was keeping a normal pace. But even with the two dozen nimble-fingered girls at this work, the black mood prevailed, so abnormal, Peter knew, among Japanese workers. Happy Delight was not a happy factory.

From a compression moulder in one corner, a conveyor slowly delivered to the girls' benches plastic half-eggs—the dolls a-borning. Deftly the girls painted them, sent them through fast-dryers, inserted small rounded weights in the base, screwed the halves together, and attached the ridiculous leering heads. Finally, listing and tilting like so many drunken clowns, the dolls rode a terminal belt past inspectors and into the shipping room.

"Never had an item sell so fast," said Mr. Porter. "Why, the demand kept right on even after Christmas."

"Who designed it?" Peter inquired.

Mr. Porter's mouth set. Without a word he led Peter beneath a hanging fire door of steel slats into the shipping room. At a desk, and glancing up as they entered, sat a little, hunch-backed man—his neck supporting, but of human dimensions now, the same grotesque doll's head with squint eyes and lopsided leer.

"I guess," Mr. Porter said quietly, "that Nature did."

Peter got the story as they walked through the plant to the main office. A puppet-maker from Kobe, one Nogami, had turned up at the factory soon after it had opened to show John Porter a model of the doll. Sensing its possibilities, John snapped up the production rights.

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No thought then, of course, that the queerly appealing face was spit and image of a living human being. That little bombshell exploded some months later—after the showing of samples at the American trade shows and when it was too late to recall shipments —with the appearance of Mr. Ko.

Mr. Ko was the toy-head man.

"Libel," murmured Peter.

"Libelous as hell," rumbled Mr. Porter. "He had Morita with him, claiming the doll made him a laughing stock. Insult to his name, how'd you say it? Something like that, John wrote. And of course they were dead right. But when it came to settling, Ko wouldn't take cash. Instead, he demanded the job of shipping foreman."

"Why shipping foreman?"

"Oh God, I don't try to understand. John thought the fellow got some sort of masochistic pleasure just being around the dolls. Of course John balked. What? Put a totally inexperienced man in charge of an entire department? So Morita pulled the strike and John gave in."

They had reached a room where girls in American dress listlessly pecked at American typewriters. As Mr. Porter pushed at a door labeled *Private*, Peter was saying: "I'd like to meet this Morita Ton."

It was not Mr. Porter who answered. "Ah, s-s-so?" The sibilance of a Japanese having the usual trouble with s's. "Him meet now, ne . . . Mist Ragran'? . . . Yes?"

Peter turned quickly to confront, flanked by two diminutive Japanese, a great ox of a human, his breadth just short of his height. And at once he knew where in time past he'd come across not only the name, but the man himself.

They regarded each other, this monster with a sleepy grin on his full-moon face, and the tall, cool-eyed American. It was the same deceptive grin Peter remembered when last he'd seen the man as runner-up in the National Sumo Wrestling Championships at Tokyo. He had seemed like a beast then, crouching on all fours, circling and being circled by another wary gorilla before tangling in the flash match.

Reared from infancy for the sport, fattened like a steer, hardened by exercise until the muscles were corded iron—that was the life of these brutes. And now Morita Ton was an oyabun; so much more, really, than the labor leader Mr. Porter supposed him. More gangster and strong-arm man, more the padrone, recruiting the workers and selling their labor to the factory, handling their money himself. And with all this, always a power in the local politics. That was the oyabun, and the mere fact of Morita's presence testified to John Porter's acceptance of this still common feudal system.

"I think we can talk Japanese," Peter said pleasantly.

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"Ah, s-s-so?" hissed Morita. "But if me rike spek Engrish, 'Mist Ragran'?"

If you could, fine, Peter was tempted to say. But one is never that impolite in Japan. Instead, he said with a shrug: "Yoroshii, have it your way."

As for the 'Mist Ragran', it was perfectly obvious the police at the jail had lost no time warning of the American's interest in the case.

Morita Ton turned to Mr. Porter. "You come time just right," he grinned amiably, and nodded toward his two companions. "These good bizmen, just now we talk. We say, Happy Deright not do good. We say, may be Mist Poter rike sell. We say, we make good offer."

Mr. Porter shot a glance at Peter. "Sell out, you mean?"

Morita Ton wagged his gigantic head. "Amerika-jin not know Japan way. We make good sing. We say, we keep make toy. Poter P'ay keep sell in U.S.A."

Mr. Porter, wondering where the catch was, sat down at a desk and eyed Morita with wary speculation. God knew, he'd had little enough stomach for this foreign venture. And so much less, now, with John dead. He rubbed his neck. Funny how it ached at the mere thought of that sinister warning. Reaching for pad and pen, he jotted some figures. For a moment he studied them, then turned back to Morita.

"What d'ya offer?"

Mr. Morita had left off smiling. His heavy lids half-veiled his eyes. "We sink, yes-s-s, two million yen, ne?"

As long as he lived, Peter would never forget Henry Porter's reaction. Slowly the blood rose in the veins of his thick neck, then spread out to suffuse his entire face. His mouth worked, his eyes bulged. Until finally, a human missile fueled by all of his recent troubles, he shot to his feet.

"Two million yen!" he exploded incredulously. "Two million lousy yen for a brand-new plant that cost eighty? Hell, that's not even six thousand dollars!"

He stepped forward and thrust a pugnacious chin into Mr. Morita's face. "So that's your game? A slowdown to soften the old boy up! Blackmail! Two million yen! Get out! Get out of my factory! You hear me? Get the hell out of here! And if I see you around again, I'll tear you limb from limb!"

And—not too curiously, perhaps, because never before had they seen a rugged American business-man in action—Mr. Morita and his henchmen decamped.

For a moment Mr. Porter glared at the door. Then, turning to the admiring Peter, he said glumly: "Well! I guess we close down for good now."

PETER RAGLAND paid two calls that evening: to a toy shop near the inn, and to the home of Tani-

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zaki Hajime. With Mr. Porter, he then dined at the inn on octopus, eels, rice and bean cokes. But, though they are the greatest of delicacies, Mr. Porter firmly rejected the fish eyes. Their accusing stare as they approached his mouth, that adamantine gentleman swore, reminded him too much of Mr. Ko.

At midnight, alone, Peter returned to the factory. Admitting himself with Mr. Porter's key, he made his way through the darkened store room. He moved quietly to avoid awakening the night watchman. And if this sounds odd, it must be recorded that such are the happy relations between labor and capital in the Land of the Rising Sun that watchmen are provided with beds instead of watch clocks.

Reaching the gloom-shrouded assembly shop, Peter was not too surprised to find a rectangle of light falling through the doorway—it was surmounted by the rolling fire door—from the shipping room. Approaching cautiously, he peeked into the room and saw—

Mr. Ko, busy as a little beaver at a bench populated with dozens of Ko-headed dolls.

Fascinated at the soundness of his own reasoning, Peter watched for several moments. Then, hearing no other sound, he advanced.

"Tachi!" he ordered.

And Ko stood. He stood in an attitude of rigid fright.

Peter's mistake, without doubt was the same that had doomed John Porter: he stepped into the room for a closer view of the operation. Instantly the rolling door crashed down behind him, blocking retreat. But where John Porter perhaps failed to fix his attention on Ko, Peter did not compound the error. Though tempted to glance back, he kept his gaze on the dwarf's peculiar eyes.

They seemed, but only seemed, to stare directly at him. Wheeling to follow their true drift, Peter found—creeping quietly toward him from out of the shadows—the immensity of Morita Ton. He had only time, as Morita sprang in his famous flash attack, to dodge aside.

Skilled in the art of fall and tumble, Morita scarcely had touched the floor than he bounced, pivoted lightly and, again on all fours, watched warily for a second opening. Peter, orthodox stand-up boxer, wondered how in the devil you countered an attack like that.

Nor was Morita his only peril. Dancing about him, the pint-sized Ko pulled at his clothes, pushed, scratched, tried to trip him. And always Morita was moving in, teeth bared in a fiend's grin, ready again to spring and grapple; and Peter, carefully side-stepping, well knowing that once those powerful hands gripped him they would never let go.

His one hope was to get the man to his feet. Not for a good three

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years had Morita Ton wrestled professionally; and there was just the chance his great stomach had softened.

Again Ko rushed at his legs, biting, clawing. As one brushes away a gnat, Peter reached down and fetched the dwarf a cuff that sent him sprawling against the bench. The bench toppled. Dolls cascaded to the floor. A cloud of obscuring yellow dust exploded in Peter's face.

Pain whipped at his eyes. In transient blindness, he strove to keep his balance. The dust was stifling, tormenting. He fought to suppress a betraying sneeze, failed, and was aware from somewhere close by of an answering curse.

The dust settled. Swimming, tear-blurred vision revealed that the table had fallen athwart the crouching Morita. Belching, red-eyed, Morita half-rose to thrust the barrier aside. And his ballooning belly formed a perfect target for Peter's looping right.

"Umph!" grunted Mr. Morita.

It was Peters solid left that finished him.

MORITA AND KO were in jail, and Tanizaki was free. But urgent messages were still flashing between Tokyo and Washington when a small group gathered next morning about the tired Peter.

"A lot of things," he was saying, "didn't quite add up. John Porter was dead, Tanizaki in jail. So if there'd been a mere personal grudge, as the police seemed to think, everything should have been fine at the plant. Which it wasn't."

Inspector Watanabe of the National Rural Police put his hand to his mouth to suppress an embarrassed giggle. But Peter was addressing Garner, the American undercover agent from Yokohama.

"There was the slowdown, the warning to Porter to go home. And yet—" He picked up a doll. "—there was no slowdown in this. Why not? Obviously, the same people who were trying to freeze Porter out had a special stake in this one item."

From his pocket Peter produced another doll, a Danjuro with the traditional actor's head.

"But that's not ours!" Mr. Porter protested.

"No, as they say in the trade I did some comparison buying last night. You see, here the two halves are sealed at the stomach. But Porter Play's are screwed together. So another big question was: why design 'em to open at all? Well, you've got your answer right there."

He nodded toward the work bench where a police assistant was still unloading the dolls: removing first the weights and the small cellophane sachets beneath them; emptying the sachets, and pouring the pure, rough-textured heroin into a container. The stuff was light tan in color.

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"Practically China's trademark," Garner said. "They smuggle it in by fishing boat. But Japan's only a flag stop. There's damn little market here and the comrades need the hard currency. The trick's to get it past customs into the States." He selected a sachet. "About half an ounce in each, I'd say."

"Worth?—"

Garner shrugged. "Not really much in Japan. Five bucks maybe just now. But when you get it Stateside and cut it with milk sugar and it gets to your junkie at three bucks a capsule—" His hand made a soaring gesture. "Three or four thousand at least!"

Henry Porter sat down heavily. "My God, my God! No wonder our sales kept increasing!"

Peter regarded him soberly. Such a rotten thing, using a child's toy. And what a black eye for Mr. Porter's firm. He could wish now he'd torn Morita apart. Still, there were others above Morita—Stateside—the big shots who'd moved in remorselessly on Porter Play's distribution setup; men whom Federal agents just as remorselessly were already tracking down through orders, invoices, bills of lading. Not until they'd nabbed every last man could Peter file his story.

"Do you think," Mr. Porter asked, "that John suspected?"

"Something at least. And nosing around, he must have walked in on Ko and Morita just as I did. Which was why he was killed. But it was all planned from the start, of course: Nogami modeling and planting the doll with John, to ease Ko into the shipping job. So Ko could load the dolls nights and code the cartons for their men in your home factory. It all fits."

Mr. Porter smiled wanly. "All but one thing," he said. "*On*."

Peter grinned. "Even that, if a bit in reverse. Certainly the police were right in thinking Tanizaki was worried about his debt to John. But not to the point of murder. His big worry was about something else. Where the local police were blind—if they really were—was in not seeing that Ko and Morita were the real backsliders. The moment I met them, I knew they were deep in some racket."

Mr. Porter looked puzzled.

Peter explained: "Or Ko never would have submitted to such shame, and Morita would never have changed stations."

"Umm," said Mr. Porter. "Good lord, I could really use Tanizaki now."

"I've talked to him," Peter said. "I think he'll come back. I think he sees it's the only way he can ever repay his *on* to you. But you must never embarrass him by letting him know."

"Know what?"

"That you know," Peter chuckled, "where he was that night."

(*Concluded on page 108*)

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DEAD WRONG

The First of a New Series of JOHNNY LIDDELL Stories

By FRANK KANE

To say that Johnny Liddell is one of America's top-echelon private eyes is merely to repeat what countless readers know. And now Liddell is to be with us often, in a hard-hitting, new series.

•

IT WAS A three story walk-up. By the time Johnny Liddell knocked on the door to 3D, he was panting heavily. It was just as well—he would have anyway the minute the door opened.

She was tall, with coppery red hair framing a heart-shaped face. A light blue dressing gown did a half-hearted job of containing a breathtaking facade. She was high-breasted and the way the sway of her torso traced designs on the dressing gown, it was apparent she wore little, if anything, underneath it. Her trim, small waist and high-set hips gave some hint of the long, shapely legs the gown did manage to cover.

"Johnny Liddell?" Her voice was low, caressing. She studied him from slanted green eyes, from under expertly tinted lids. Her lips were full, moist.

"What's left of him." He looked back down the stairwell. "That's quite a defense gadget you've got there. More effective than a chastity belt."

The redhead grinned again, stepped aside. "But not as permanent." She took his hat, tossed it

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The jazz musician's brother was in serious trouble. Only . . . it didn't worry him any more, because he'd been picked up dead. All Johnny had to do was tell the blonde why!

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at a table. "Sit down, I'll make you a drink."

He tottered to a chair, dropped into it.

"Any preference?"

"In liquor? Scotch."

She turned, headed for the kitchen. He watched the easy play of her hips against the clinging fabric of the gown, started to feel better. When she returned, the effect from the front was equally revitalizing. She carried a bottle, two glasses and some ice on a tray, set them down on the coffee table in front of him. The devastating dip of the front of her gown as she set the tray down completed his cure, so that the Scotch would not have been needed.

He watched while she tilted the bottle over each of the glasses, dropped in a couple of pieces of ice. She picked up his glass, swirled the liquor over the ice, handed it to him.

"Mr. Liddell—"

"Johnny."

She smiled, shrugged. "All right—Johnny. When I called your office, did my name mean anything to you?"

Liddell pursed his lips, considered, shook his head. "You said Horton. Sally Horton."

She nodded, dropped down on the couch alongside him. "My husband is Bob Horton, the jazz pianist at the *Nest*. You've heard of him?"

Liddell nodded. "I'm not what you'd call an aficionado, but I've heard of him."

"You dig jazz?"

"I'm an old schmaltz man from away back. Carolina moon, June, spoon. That kind of stuff." He took a deep swallow from his glass. "Wasn't there some kind of an accident or something? Your husband's brother—"

The redhead turned the full power of the green eyes on him. "It wasn't an accident. Jack was murdered." She dropped her eyes, stared down into her glass. "Bob murdered him, Johnny."

Liddell grunted. He dug into his pocket, came up with a battered pack of cigarettes, held it out to the girl. She took one, stuck it between her lips. He scratched a match, waited until she had filled her lungs with smoke, then flipped one into the corner of his mouth. He lit his cigarette, exhaled twin streams from his nostrils, waited for the girl to talk.

"I suppose you wonder why I called you, instead of going to the police?" She looked up at him, let the smoke dribble from between half parted lips. "They wouldn't believe me. They think it was a hit-and-run accident."

"What makes you think it wasn't?"

"Bob and his brother haven't been getting along lately. Bob's gotten himself into debt over his head. He tried to get the money to square himself from his brother,

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but Jack wouldn't bail him out. The last time it happened he said he was through."

"It's happened before? Where'd the money go?"

The redhead took a deep swallow from her glass, set it down on the coffee table. "Bob has a monkey on his back, Johnny. A great big one. And it costs more than he can afford to keep it. He's been desperate for money. I heard the row the night Jack turned him down. It was pretty rugged."

"And now?"

Sally Horton shrugged. "Bob is the sole beneficiary under an old will Jack had. And there's plenty of insurance." She dropped her eyes to her lap. "I guess you're wondering why I'd be turning my own husband in like this?"

Liddell nodded. "The thought had occurred to me."

She met his gaze. "Another thing that Bob and Jack were fighting about was me. Jack and I were planning to be married as soon as I could get a divorce from Bob."

Liddell whistled soundlessly. "And you haven't told this to the police?"

"I want to be sure, Johnny. It stacks up pretty bad against Bob, but if there's just one chance in a thousand that it was an accident, I wouldn't want it on my conscience that I set him up."

"What do you want me to do?"

The soft lips set in a hard line. "On the other hand, if he killed Jack, I don't want him to get away with it. I want you to find out for me. What I do will depend on what you find."

"Where do I find your husband?"

The redhead shrugged. "Any one of a half dozen pads in the Village. Almost every night at the *Nest* he cuts out with some of the real cool set and the blast goes until it's time for him to show back at the *Nest*."

She picked up her glass, drained it and held it out to him. While he was spilling Scotch over the ice cubes she said, "That won't be until about ten." She held her glass to her lips, studied him over the rim. "You'll have almost four hours to kill."

"It's going to take me almost that long to recover from that climb." Liddell reached over, helped himself to some more Scotch. "What'll you be doing in the meantime?"

"Helping you to recover."

He grinned, touched her glass with his. "That could make the collapse permanent."

THE NEST WAS a large subterranean room that had been built by knocking out the walls of three adjoining cellars. It was lighted only by candles stuck in the necks of wine bottles, and a perpetual cloud of slowly stirring smoke swirled near the ceiling.

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Mobiles dangled in the smoky air, and the customers enjoyed the proceedings from canvas chairs, while waitresses with long dank hair and dangling earrings worked their way through the chairs, their swaying hips brushing lightly against the customers.

Johnny Liddell walked down the short flight of steps from the street level, stood in the doorway looking around. He squinted into the dimness, satisfied himself that the piano on the small dais at the far end of the room was unoccupied. In another corner of the room, a tall, shaggy type in black beret and shapeless slacks and sport shirt was reading some German verse with almost comic gestures. Sitting at his feet, a bearded man was pounding unmelodiously on a pair of bongos.

Suddenly, one of the girls at a nearby table jumped to her feet, started to wave and sway in zombie-like fashion, with no expression and less grace. Nobody paid any attention.

Liddell wandered in, felt his way to a canvas chair near the wall. In a moment, one of the long-haired hostesses materialized in the dusk.

"Bob Horton going to show tonight?" he asked.

The waitress bobbed her head. "Sure thing, Pops."

"I hear he's pretty good."

"Good? He's away out. I dig him the most, man. The most. You for refreshment or just for the kicks, Pops?"

"Got any Scotch?"

The girl shook her head with no show of enthusiasm. "Chianti. Or beer." She brushed some stray hairs from her face. "You're too far downtown for Twenty-one, man. Which? Chianti or beer?"

"Beer."

The girl bobbed her head, turned, worked her way through the close-set chairs. Her jeans were easily two sizes too small.

Liddell settled back, watched the gyrations of the girl dancing to the bongo beat. He became aware of a girl sitting to his left who seemed to find him interesting. Unlike most of the wild hairdos in the place, she sported a pert gamin cut, affected a cigarette holder tilted from the corner of her mouth. When he turned to return her gaze, she grinned at him.

"Slumming, Pops?"

He grinned back. "I heard about Bob Horton. They tell me he's the swingingest. I had to hear for myself."

The girl picked up her chair, moved it over to where Liddell sat. The man she had been sitting with gave them both a disinterested look, shrugged. He turned to the girl on his other side.

She looked at the other man as though she'd never seen him before. "I been with him since last night, man. When you're making it with a cat, why that's great.

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But you can't stick around forever, man. You want kicks, you got to keep moving. You dig?"

"I dig." He waited while the waitress opened a bottle of beer, set it on the floor next to his chair, shoved a folded bill at her. "You like a beer or a chianti?" he asked the girl sitting next to him.

She held up the cigarette holder. "I'm swinging. Real crazy." She watched while he poured some beer into his glass. "You get your kicks from that? That's real square, Pops. Try Pall Mall", she indicated the reefer. "It's real wild."

A broad-shouldered man with a shock of black hair accentuating the pallor of his complexion, walked in the front door, headed toward a door set next to the dais on which the piano stood.

"There's Horton," the girl told him dreamily. "I dig him, Pops. I really dig him the most."

"What's back there? Behind that door?"

The girl with the gamin cut seemed to be having trouble focusing her eyes on Liddell's face. "He pads down there between blasts." She eyed him curiously. "I'm beginning to think maybe I don't dig you, Pops. You're not here for kicks, are you?"

"Matter of fact, I came to see Horton—not to hear him." He set his glass down by the side of his chair. "Whereabouts is this pad of his back there?"

"Look, Pops, I dig Horton. When he starts sending, man, I get so high I know everything. I mean, like I know why." She shook her head. "But Horton can be a mean cat, Pops. Oh man, you don't want to interfere with him with his kick. I mean, man, what a drag."

"Real violent type, huh?"

The girl stared down at her cigarette, a glassiness was beginning to come into her eyes. "For kicks, Dad, anything. He's away out. Away out."

Liddell pulled himself out of the canvas chair, started to feel his way through the closely packed chairs toward the door in the rear. By the time he'd reached the door, the girl with the gamin cut had moved in on another man, seemed to forget Liddell had ever existed.

The other side of the door led to a damp-smelling passageway. There was a door on either side of the short passage. Liddell walked up to one, put his ear to it, listened. He could hear nothing but his own breathing. He reached down, turned the knob, pushed it open. It was stacked high with junk, appeared to be a catch-all for the buildings above whose cellar space the *Nest* had preempted.

He walked to the other door, knocked. After a moment, the door opened. Bob Horton was a few inches shorter than Liddell, but he made up in breadth what he lacked in height. His face, though, was sallow, had a yellowish tinge. His

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hair showed the effects of having been raked by his fingers. He eyed Liddell hostilely.

"Yeah?"

"My name's Liddell, Horton. I'm investigating your brother's death."

The man inside the door made an attempt at a sneer, didn't quite make it come off. "He's dead, isn't he? So what's to investigate?" He started to close the door.

Liddell put his shoulder to the door, sent the other man reeling back into the room. Horton recovered with amazing speed, moved in on Liddell. He threw a high left to the head which Johnny fielded with the side of his arm, took a glancing blow to the side of the jaw. It was too high to do much damage. But Liddell didn't get out of the way of a looping uppercut in time. He was slammed back into the wall, and slid to a sitting position on the floor.

He scrambled to his feet in time to handle the other man's rush to end the fight. His first left caught Horton in the side of the head, spun him halfway around. As Horton tried to right himself, Liddell buried a right in his midsection, then slammed his left against the side of the pianist's head as he jack-knifed. Horton spun around fell forward, knocked over a chair as he hit the floor. He struggled to rise, slumped back on his face.

Liddell caught him under the arms, dragged him to the unmade bed, dumped him onto it. He reached down, caught the cuff of Horton's sleeve, rolled back the sleeve. The entire inner surface of the arm was pitted with needle scars and small ulcers.

He righted the chair, pulled it close to the bed, waited for the pianist to come to life. After a moment, Horton managed to sit up. He swung his legs off the bed, staggered to the small lavatory and retched.

When he came out of the lavatory, his eyes were watery, his hair hung dankly over his face. "I'll kill you for that, mister."

"You've done all the killing you're going to do, Pops," Liddell told him.

Horton's eyes narrowed. "Who sent you here? My wife?"

"Maybe." Liddell waited until the pianist had walked back to the bed, dropped onto it. "She thinks you killed your brother. She wants to be sure before she goes to the police." He watched the man on the bed, got no reaction.

Finally, Horton looked up. "My brother was killed by a hit and runner. Why should I kill him?"

"For the insurance. Because your wife was getting ready to divorce you and marry him."

Horton fumbled through his pockets, found no cigarettes, finally picked a crumpled butt out of the ashtray near the bed. "That's crazy. Jack wouldn't marry her. And she knows it."

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"You and your brother were on bad terms. He wouldn't lend you any money to feed that monkey of yours."

Horton made an involuntary motion toward his left arm, quickly dropped his hand. "Jack and I made that up. Right here in the club the night he was killed."

He lit the cigarette, took a deep drag, emptied his lungs. "He dropped down to see me, to tell me he changed his mind. He was going to lend me the money. Enough to help kick the habit. We were friends again. He was going to help me."

"Where were you when he was killed?"

Horton glared at him, dropped his eyes first. "Right here. Jack had left for home, I came back here. I was getting ready to cut out with some cats, and—"

"Nobody saw the car that killed your brother?"

"So?"

Liddell shrugged. He walked over to the far side of the room, pulled back a rough curtain. The window behind it had been painted black. "Where's that go?"

Horton shrugged. "How do I know?"

Liddell grinned glumly. "Make a guess." He unlatched the window, tugged it up. Outside was an alley. Liddell stuck his head out, looked up to the end where a short flight of steps led to the street level. He pulled his head in, closed the window.

"So what's that prove?" Horton wanted to know. "I never even knew it was there."

He got up walked over to the lavatory, splashed some water into his face, raked his hair back out of his face with his clenched fingers.

"Look, mister, I've taken all the jazz from you I'm gonna take. You bust in here, push me around—" He shook his head. "I'm not taking it. So my wife hired you to frame me, go ahead."

He walked over to Liddell. "But you dig this, Pops. You listen real hard. The next time you break into my pad without a paper, you don't walk away from it. And it's all legal."

Liddell wondered just when Horton had taken his last shot, figured it must have been only a few minutes before he broke in and that it was now taking hold. The bigger and bigger man Horton felt himself to be, the slighter and slighter chance that he'd do any talking.

Liddell walked to the door, pulled it open. "The next time I bust in on you," he said, "I'll have the paper and some fuzz to serve it."

He slammed the door to the dressing room behind him, headed back into the club.

INSPECTOR HERLEHY sat behind

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the oversized, varnished desk in his office at headquarters, stared across at Johnny Liddell. The inspector's jaws were clomping methodically on the ever-present wad of gum, the color in his face was a little higher than normal.

"Now, suppose you level with me, Johnny." He picked up a typewritten note. "Lieutenant Michaelson in Accident Investigation tells me you've been asking for the file on a recent hit and run killing." He flipped the paper back onto the desk. "Why?"

Liddell shrugged. He removed the half-burned cigarette from the corner of his mouth, studied the glowing end. "I just wanted a look at the coroner's report. The kind of injuries, stuff like that."

"Why?"

Liddell replaced the cigarette in his mouth, squinted through the smoke that spiralled upward. "I'm not too sure he was killed by a hit and runner."

Herlehy leaned back in his chair, pursed his lips. "Neither are we." He permitted himself a grin at the drop of Liddell's jaw. "We're far from satisfied. But what put you on it?"

Liddell took a last drag on his cigarette, reached forward and crushed it out. "Horton's sister-in-law. She thinks her husband killed him."

The inspector raised his eyebrows. "Motive?"

"Jealousy and greed."

Herlehy considered it, bobbed his head. "Good motive." He explored the faint stubble along the side of his jaw with the tips of his fingers. "Opportunity?"

"Horton has a room behind the *Nest*. It opens on an alley that runs to the street. He says he left his brother in the club, went back to his room to rest." Liddell shrugged. "The way I read it, he could have cut out that window, ran to the street, come up behind his brother and clobbered him. That's why I wanted to see the type of injuries."

Herlehy reached forward, pushed a button on the base of his phone. The door opened, a uniformed cop stuck his head in. "Get us a couple of coffees, will you, Ray? Regular for me, black for the shamus."

The cop grinned at Liddell, withdrew his head.

Herlehy turned back to Liddell. "You wouldn't be holding out, Liddell?"

"How?"

Herlehy shrugged. "You got a client on this, that I know. You implied it was the wife. It wouldn't be the insurance company?"

Liddell shook his head. "No, but it's an idea. Bob Horton is beneficiary. If it's an accident, he collects double. If it was a murder—"

"The insurance company saves plenty."

"And you think it was murder."

Herlehy eyed him blandly.

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"Who said so? I said we were looking into it." He reached into his basket, brought out a file. "When Mike told me you were snooping, I figured you might as well get it from the horse's mouth." He pushed the folder across the desk. "There's the Horton file from A.I.D. Medical report, everything."

Johnny Liddell lifted the report from the edge of the desk, flipped through it. He scowled at the medical report, looked up. "According to this, the injuries could have been sustained in a hit-and-run accident," he said. "A depressed lineal fracture of the skull that could have been caused by contact with the curb."

Herlehy nodded. "So, we've gone along with the hit-and-run verdict. Until and unless we can prove otherwise."

The door opened, and the patrolman returned with two containers of coffee. He set them down on the desk. When he'd closed the door behind him on the way out, Herlehy leaned forward, snagged one of the containers.

"This is the black." He pushed it across the desk, picked up the other container. "There was a car on that street that night, Johnny. A man walking his dog saw it come tearing down Sullivan Street just about the time of the accident."

Liddell gouged the top out of his container. "You get a make?"

The inspector shook his head. "The usual. A dark sedan—could be a Ford or a Plymouth or a Chevvy—"

"—or a DeSoto or any other kind," Liddell nodded. He sipped at the coffee, burned his tongue and swore under his breath. "But there was a car? And it did come from where the body was found?"

Herlehy nodded. "There was a car."

"So why do you even question that it was a hit-and-run killing?"

The inspector picked up a pencil, stirred the coffee in his container. "Because there was no dirt or mud where the body was found."

Liddell stared at him, scowled. "There's always some dirt or mud dislodged from under the fender when a car hits somebody. Especially if it hits him hard enough to throw him against the curb to kill him." The inspector raised his coffee to his mouth, took a deep swallow. "Nothing."

"Then whoever was in that car could have witnessed the killing?" Liddell considered it, his scowl deepening. "Then why haven't they come forward? They wouldn't have to worry about getting tagged for a hit-and-run—"

Herlehy shook his head. "All they'd have to do would be to submit their car for an examination. No dents, no smashed headlights, no paint knocked off, they'd be in the clear." He took another swal-

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low from the container. "But nobody's come forward."

"But why haven't you—?"

Herlehy cut him off with a glance. "Done something about it? We have. We've alerted the insurance company not to pay the policy off."

"I get it. The next move is up to the dead man's brother."

The inspector nodded. "And if that insurance is the motive for the murder, I don't think we'll have long to wait. And the faster the killer makes the next move, the more chance there is he'll make a mistake. That's what we're counting on. That the killer'll be stampeded into making a mistake."

Liddell nodded. "Maybe I can help stampede him."

Herlehy pursed his lips. "Some such thought had occurred to me."

THE REDHEAD IN Liddell's outer office made no attempt to disguise her annoyance as he walked in.

"Don't tell me where to reach you, maestro. That might take some of the suspense out of this job." She tore a piece of paper out of the carriage of her typewriter, crumpled it into a ball and threw it at the waste basket.

"Something?" Liddell asked her mildly.

"Just a madman prowling the place for an hour or so, positive you were hiding under a desk. That is, from what little I could understand of what he was saying."

"Name of Horton?"

Pinky shrugged. "We didn't get that confidential. He just barged in here, busted into your office and went through the closets like he was going to give you an estimate on your old clothes."

She pushed a loose tendril of hair into place with the tip of one finger. "When I asked him what it was all about, he talked like a character out of Allen Ginsberg." She stared at Liddell. "Was he for real?"

Liddell nodded. "He plays a hot piano down at the *Nest* in the Village. Away out. Crazy, chick, real wild."

The redhead groaned. "Not you, too? This keeps up, we're going to need an interpreter in here. What's with him and you?"

"He thinks I convinced the police that he killed his brother. He's apparently annoyed. The police have told the insurance company to hold off paying on his brother's accidental death policy and Horton probably has it all spent already."

"That could be annoying," Pinky agreed. "And if he—"

The door burst open, Sally Horton came in. Her eyes jumped from Liddell to the redhead and back. "Thank God you're all right, Johnny. My husband—"

"He's already been here," Liddell told her. He took her by the

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arm, led her to the private office. "We don't want to be disturbed, Pink," he told the girl behind the typewriter.

Pinky's eyes took inventory of the blonde's assets. "Figures," she bobbed her head. "You should have been a C.P.A."

Liddell scowled at her, closed the private office door behind him. He guided the blonde to the chair opposite the desk, walked over to where a water cooler stood against the wall humming to itself. He filled a cup full of water, brought two extra paper cups to the desk. From his bottom drawer, he brought out a half-empty bottle of Dewar's. He spilled some Scotch into the two empty cups, softened it with water, held one out to the woman.

"Try this."

Sally Horton drained the cup, leaned her head back against the back of the chair. "It was real rugged. I've seen him in a rage before, but never like this. He went completely crazy."

"When did he find out about it?"

The green, slanted eyes studied him from under thick lashes. "You knew about it? About the insurance company refusing to pay off until an investigation could be made?"

Liddell spilled more Scotch into each of the cups. "I just heard about it from the police." He held out the cup, waited while the blonde took a swallow. "How come he didn't know it last night when I saw him at the *Nest?*"

Sally Horton shrugged. "It's like I told you. He sometimes doesn't come home for days. There was a letter there for him, but I didn't open it. This morning, he started worrying about what you said and he called the insurance company. They told him he'd already been notified they were withholding payment."

"He flipped?"

She nodded, rubbed the backs of her arms with the flat of her hands. "I've never seen him in such a rage. He went tearing out, yelling at the top of his voice."

"How'd you know he was coming here?"

"I didn't. From the state he was in, I knew he'd go looking for a fix. I've been hitting all the shooting galleries I ever heard of him using. A half hour ago, I bumped into a friend of his on Sixth Avenue. He said Bob was raving about getting even with you."

She got up from her chair, walked over to where he stood. "I came as soon as I could. If anything happened to you—" She slid her arms around his neck, pressed against him. "I couldn't stand it, knowing I got you into it."

The door to the outer office swung open, Pinky breezed in. She stood at the doorway, smiled brightly. "Pardon me." She started out again.

"What'd you want?" Liddell

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growled. He disengaged himself from the blonde's clutches, walked around the desk. "Barging in here like that!"

"I wanted to know who to bill on this case." She looked over to where Sally Horton was inspecting her make-up in a compact mirror. "I didn't know you were discussing terms."

"When I'm ready to send the bill, I'll let you know," Liddell snapped. "And from now on, knock."

"Yes, sir." She turned to the door, then as an afterthought turned back, grinned at him. "But I don't think it would have done any good—"

"What wouldn't have done any good?"

"My knocking. I don't think you would have heard me if I pounded." She smiled sweetly in the direction of the blonde, made a production of closing the door after her.

"Quite a character." Sally Horton snapped the compact shut, dropped it into her bag. "I suppose you keep her around for atmosphere."

Liddell grunted. He dropped into the desk chair, picked up a pack of cigarettes from the desk, held it up to the girl. She shook her head, he stuck a cigarette in the corner of his mouth.

"Your husband got a gun?"

A frown corrugated the blonde's forehead. "He didn't have when he left the apartment. He might have gotten once since. I—I don't think he'd try to tackle you without one."

Liddell touched a match to the cigarette, blew a stream of smoke at the ceiling. "How about you? If he gets the idea that you sicced me onto him—"

The blonde caught her lower lip between her teeth. "I think I can handle him. He usually listens to me no matter how high he's riding."

Liddell nodded. He pulled over his desk pad, scribbled an address on it. "Here's my home address and phone number. If he does show up and you can't handle him, don't hesitate to call."

Sally Horton took the paper, folded it, stuck it into her purse. "Does the same thing go if I get too lonely waiting?" She headed for the door, stopped with her hand on the knob. "It'd have at least one advantage. The doors probably lock on the inside." She opened the door, walked out.

After a moment, he heard the door to the corridor open and slam shut. Pinky walked to the door of the private office, leaned against the frame.

"How about it, boss? Do we bill her or charge it off to experience?" She grinned at the scowl on his face. "It may be fun, but you can't discount it at the bank."

It was almost midnight when Johnny Liddell dropped the cab

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in front of his apartment hotel. He rode the creaking elevator to the fifth floor, crossed to 506.

He fitted the key to the lock, pushed the door open. He reached in, snapped on the light.

There was a smash of glass, then two shots came so close together they sounded like one. Liddell saw them chew bits out of the door jamb at his head. He snapped off the light, threw himself forward on the floor, tugging at the .45 in his shoulder holster. Two more shots came from the window, whined over his head to smack dully into the far wall.

Cautiously, he squirmed toward the window, his automatic poked out in front of him. He thought he saw a figure silhouetted on the outside, squeezed his trigger twice. The .45 sounded like a cannon in the confined space. He threw two more quick shots as a cover, pulled himself to his feet, ran to the window.

The fire escape was empty. He pulled up the window sash, stuck his eye to the corner. In the dimness of the yard, he saw a figure heading for the alley exit. He fired at it. The slug screeched shrilly as it ricochetted off the pavement.

The figure in the yard spun. There was a vicious spit as its hand seemed to belch orange flame. It spat twice more. Once it gouged a piece of concrete from the wall close enough to Liddell's head to sting him with its splinters. He pulled his head in. By the time he looked again, the figure had disappeared through the doorway into the alley.

Liddell scowled at the pounding on his door. He walked back, snapped on the light, tugged the door open. A white-faced manager stood in the doorway. "What's going on?" he quavered, his eyes hop-scotching around the room, coming to rest on the .45 in Liddell's fist.

"Sneak thief," Liddell grunted. "No harm done."

"That's what you think," the manager complained. "Half the tenants have been scared out of a week's growth. Mrs. Maher down below had a fainting spell and—"

Liddell pushed the door closed. "Tell them it was a Civil Defense drill. Tell them the next time they hear shooting to head for the shelter." He closed the door in the man's face, headed for the telephone stand.

The directory gave the number of the *Nest* as We-6 2359. He slammed the book shut, dialled the number. After a moment, a shrill voice came through the receiver.

"The *Nest*. Good evening."

"Let me talk to Bob Horton."

There was a slight pause. "Sorry, Pops. He ain't showed yet tonight. Ain't heard a word from him. But we got some Gerry Mulligan biscuits that—"

Liddell depressed the bar on the phone, waited a few seconds, then

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dialled a number. He listened to it ring five times, then a sleepy voice growled at him. "This is Herlehy."

"Sorry to call you at home, inspector."

"Who is this?"

"Liddell. Now, wait a minute—" He staved off any complaint. "I wouldn't have called if it weren't an emergency. If you want to stop another killing, you'd better pick up Bob Horton."

There was a slight pause. "Why?"

"Somebody just shot up my apartment. Horton hasn't shown at the upholstered sewer he works in. By now, the fat's in the fire. The insurance company has already served warning they're not paying off. There's no telling what he'll do next."

The sleepiness was gone from the inspector's voice. "I'll get the boys right on it. If you get anything, don't try grandstanding. Get right back to me. I'll be in my office."

"Me, grandstand? You know me, inspector."

"Yeah. That's why I'm warning you. No grandstanding!" There was a click as the connection was broken.

Liddell dropped his receiver on its hook. He walked into the kitchenette, brought in a bottle of Scotch, some ice and a glass. He poured himself a stiff shot, dropped in ice. Then he brought a box of cartridges out of the drawer, started reloading the .45.

He was on his third cigarette and his second Scotch when the telephone shrilled at his elbow. He scooped the receiver up, held it to his ear.

"Johnny? This is Sally Horton." Her voice was low, breathless. "I'm in the lobby of your building. Can I come up?"

"Come ahead. I'm in room five hundred six."

"I'll be right up."

Liddell frowned at the receiver, dropped it back on its hook. He walked into the kitchen, brought in another glass. He had just filled it with ice and was washing it down with Scotch when there was a knock on the door. He slid the .45 from its holster, walked over to the door, pulled it open.

It was the blonde. Her eyes went wide at the sight of the .45. He grinned at her, stuck it back into its hammock. "Don't mind the artillery. I've already had a visitor this evening who antiqued my furniture with bullet holes. I wanted to make sure you were here under your own power."

Sally Horton walked in. Her eyes took in the smashed window, the fresh scars in the wall and door where bullets had gouged out deep splinters. She turned to Liddell. "Was it Bob?"

He shrugged. "Figures. He didn't show at the club tonight." He led her to the table, handed her a

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drink. "Whoever it was was waiting for me when I got home, he was a lousy shot. But I'm not planning to give him a chance to improve with practice."

The girl took a deep swallow from the glass, set it down. Her face was scrubbed clean of make-up, save for a smear of lipstick. She wore a full-length camel's hair polo coat, loafers, no stockings.

"He's home. At my place." She caught Liddell by the lapels. "He's a crazy man, Johnny. I managed to lock myself in the bedroom and get out by the fire escape. He was raving and ranting about being double-crossed. I was scared."

"Why didn't you call me?"

"I don't want him to kill you, Johnny. And he will. I tell you he's crazy."

"Sit down and catch your breath." He helped her out of her coat, whistled softly. Under it she wore only a pair of light blue pajamas, the trouser legs rolled up to her knees.

"I—I was ready for bed when he came. I was too scared to take time to dress. I just grabbed a coat and ran."

Johnny fought to keep his glance at face level, lost the struggle. "I'd better get over there. You make yourself at home until—"

She caught his hand. "Don't go now. Give him an hour or so. I know Bob. He'll knock himself out, then pass out." She was close to him, he could feel her breath on his face. "I don't want anything to happen to you."

"Id better get it over with. I'll be back."

The blonde shrugged. She walked over to the end table, helped herself to a cigarette. "Suit yourself."

When she turned and walked toward him, the sway of her torso traced patterns on the shiny silk of her pajama jacket. "Please be careful." She walked up to him, covered his mouth with hers.

JOHNNY LIDDELL stopped outside the Horton apartment, put his ear to the door. The only sound was his own heavy breathing after the three flight walk-up. He tugged the .45 loose from its holster, reached for the knob. It turned in his hand. He pushed the door open, stepped back out of range. After a moment, he stepped into the open doorway, fumbled along the wall for the switch.

Bob Horton sat in an upholstered chair not ten feet from him, staring at him with unblinking eyes. His arm dangled over the side of the chair, almost touching the .38 that lay there. A stream of red ran from the corner of his mouth. There was a small black hole through his left temple, with a ragged rip on the side of his jaw where the slug had taken a piece of the bone with it on the way out.

Liddell closed the door, walked over and stared down at the

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dead man. He reached down, pulled up the sleeve on Horton's right arm. In addition to the punctures he had seen the night before, there were several new ones, discolored, angry looking, an inch or so apart.

Liddell walked to the bedroom door, tried it. It was still locked. He took a last look around the room, walked to the telephone, dialled headquarters.

"Inspector Herlehy," he told the operator.

"The inspector comes on in the morning. I'll let you have—"

Liddell persuaded the man at the switchboard to try the inspector's office, heard the grunt of surprise when Herlehy answered.

"This is Liddell, Inspector. I found Bob Horton at his place."

"Keep him there. I'll have some men—"

Liddell glanced over at the man slumped in the chair. "Won't be any trouble keeping him. He's wearing the hole from a .38 for an extra ear." He could hear the inspector's breath hiss through his teeth. "Gun's right here on the floor beside him."

"We'll be right over."

JOHNNY LIDELL slouched in the big chair, watched the blonde bustling around his kitchen. The smell of coffee was strong and promising. Sally Horton still wore the flimsy pajamas, rolled to the knees, a shirt of Liddell's draped over her shoulders, the tails flapping ludicrously as she walked.

Even the loose shirt couldn't disguise the fluidity of her movement as she walked toward him, balancing a cup of coffee on a saucer. She made it without spilling a drop, pushed it at him triumphantly. She grinned as he tasted it, burned his tongue.

"That's an old trick," Liddell complained. "Burn my tongue so I can't taste that the toast is burned." He set the cup back on the saucer. "You'd better be thinking about going back to your place, hadn't you?"

The smile dimmed. "Must I?"

Liddell shrugged. "Herlehy will probably want to be talking to you. After the coroner's done with the autopsy."

The smile went blank, some of the color drained from the girl's face. "Autopsy? But he shot himself. You don't need an autopsy for that. You said yourself—"

"He had a bullet hole in his head. It came out through his jaw." He watched the muscles form little knots at the sides of her jaw. "A suicide rarely holds the gun so high the bullet comes out lower than at the place of entry."

She backed away from him. "Then you killed him?"

Liddell grinned glumly. "No. You did."

He took a swallow of the coffee, put cup and saucer on the floor alongside his chair. "And in a little

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while, Inspector Herlehy'll be able to prove it."

"You're crazy," she told him in shocked certainty. "Why should I kill my husband?"

"For one thing, because you're tired of him. You might have stuck if he could hold onto his brother's insurance. At least until you figured a way to get it away from him."

"But I hired you. I was the one who told you he killed Jack. If it hadn't been for me—"

Liddell shook his head. "The police weren't fooled. When you opened that letter from the insurance company saying they were withholding payment, you knew you had to find a patsy. And your husband was made to order."

She shook her head wordlessly, backed away. "You're wrong. Bob killed his brother. You said so yourself."

"I said that he could have. That was all part of your plan. You waited outside in the car. When Jack came out, you clouted him with something—a tire iron probably. Then you took off." He watched the girl's face. "The police have a witness to the fact that a car was in that alley when Jack was killed."

"You can't pin that on me."

Liddell sighed. "The worst part of it was that it was all for nothing. Even if the police write your husband's death off as suicide, you can't collect the money."

The color flooded back into her face. "I do. I'm his only heir. As his wife—"

"You get what he had. But if the police buy the story that he killed his brother, he can't collect either the insurance or the estate. There's a little clause in the law that says a murderer can't benefit from the fruits of his crime."

The color started to drain away again. She stared at him. "I—I killed him for nothing? I—I couldn't collect anyhow?" Her eyes began to glaze as she started to laugh. Her laughter hit a high peak, she began to shake uncontrollably.

Liddell got out of his chair, shook her. She continued to shrill. He hit her with the flat of his hand; the laughter broke off on a high note. She stared at him.

"I hated him but I would have stayed for the money. Now I get neither." She looked up at Liddell. "What do I do, Johnny?"

He shook his head. "That's up to you, chickie. But whatever you decide to do, you'd better do it fast." He consulted his watch. "That autopsy ought to be over in an hour and they'll have all the proof they need that Horton had been fed a skin full of junk and then shot."

The blonde stared at him. "How could you know?"

"There were two real fresh punctures on his arm. One was enough to send him out of this world—the other to keep him

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there. And the autopsy will show it." He watched while she walked over, shrugged into her coat. "Where are you going?"

"To give myself up." She smiled at him wanly. "I can't wait to see whether I killed him in a moment of temporary insanity or in self-defense. Watch the papers." She walked to the door, left.

Liddell reached down, picked up the cup and saucer. He stared glumly at the coffee, pulled himself out of the chair and spilled the coffee into the sink. He lifted the Scotch bottle from the closet, spilled three fingers into a glass.

"What a waste of good material," he groaned.

He lifted the glass to his lips, drained it, shook his head sadly. "What a waste!"

THE TOY-HEAD MAN by Franklin Gregory

(*Concluded from page 89*)

"But I don't."

"He was at a wedding."

"A wedding? Why the devil couldn't he say so?"

"It was his own. And the girl was a geisha. There are geishas and geishas, and this one happens to be a nice one. But you'll never convince Tanizaki's strait-laced old papa of that."

"Oh," said Mr. Porter. And he did comprehend. Only a father could, who'd had such great hopes for a song.

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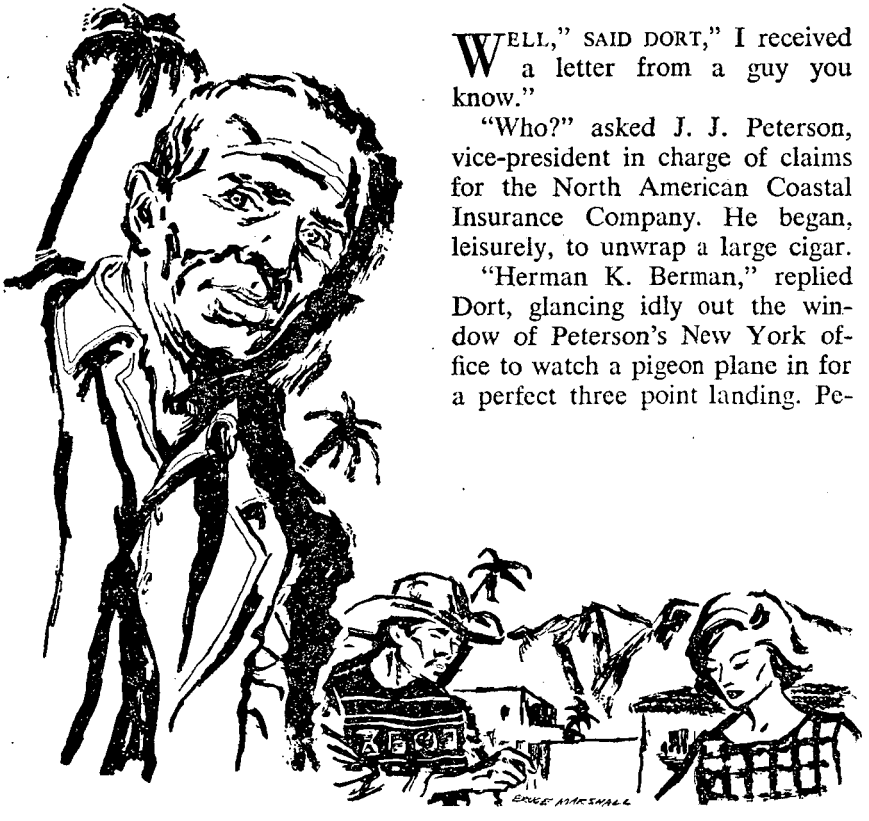
A very famous mystery writer laces grand larceny with a dash of Latin humor and high-tension suspense

by BILL S. BALLINGER



"WELL," SAID DORT," I received a letter from a guy you know."

"Who?" asked J. J. Peterson, vice-president in charge of claims for the North American Coastal Insurance Company. He began, leisurely, to unwrap a large cigar.

"Herman K. Berman," replied Dort, glancing idly out the window of Peterson's New York office to watch a pigeon plane in for a perfect three point landing. Pe-

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terson's fingers snapped the expensive cigar and the ends flipped to the carpet. "Sure," continued Dort, returning his attention to Peterson, "Berman sort of indicated you knew him."

"I know him all right," said Peterson, breathing heavily. "He's an embezzler who cost us twenty-five thousand dollars."

"How'd it happen?" asked Dort.

"It was one of those things which don't make much sense. Berman used to teach college—he was a classics professor at Markam—a little fresh-water college on Long Island. Had been a fixture for ten, fifteen years. Then an old biddy named Elsa Shrewsbury kicked off and left twenty-five thousand bucks to establish an Otto Shrewsbury Scholarship Award. Old man Shrewsbury was her husband who'd died thirty years before and left her a wad of dough."

Peterson paused, then continued indignantly. "This Professor Herman Berman had always kept his nose clean, and he was put in charge of the dough." Peterson shook his head. "Who'd ever suspected the egg-head?"

Dort, a special investigator, had done business many times with Peterson. He said, impatiently, "So Berman grabbed the dough and departed."

"Your understatement is admirable," said Peterson. "Berman stole the dough and ran like hell." Spotting a long segment of the broken cigar, he retrieved it. Lighting a match, Peterson settled back in his chair and continued, "But the college, unfortunately, had previously conceived the bright idea of having the administrator of the funds bonded—Berman." He regarded the fuming end of his cigar with distaste.

"Maybe," Dort remarked calmly, "Berman felt he was entitled to the award himself."

"Berman was a man in his late forties," Peterson said, "and he was a bachelor. I think he was getting fed up and all of a sudden he decided he'd get romance. He got a bunch of ideas, and a yen to live in Shangri-la."

"Anyway," asked Dort, "which'd you rather have back—Herman K. Berman, or your twenty-five grand?"

"I'd rather have both."

"You can't have both," Dort said, "but I'm giving you your choice."

"In that case," Peterson said promptly, "I'll take the dough."

Dort turned away his boney, angular face to conceal any stray expression of triumph. He said indifferently, "I guess I can get your money back—less, of course, the usual commission."

"Twenty percent." Peterson shrugged hopelessly. "All right, Dort—half a loaf and all that." Then he added hastily, "but you got to pay your own expenses."

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Dort rose to his feet and walked to the door. "It's a deal, but you've got to permit the Professor to return to the States, and agree to drop all charges and prosecution."

"You get the twenty-five thousand back, and I'll agree to anything," Peterson replied, heavily.

ON THE PHONE to South America, Dort dropped his conversation with the stewardess long enough to read again the letter which he had received from Herman K. Berman. For the second time, he observed the envelope had been slit neatly, then expertly re-glued together. Someone had obviously read Berman's letter before Dort had received it. The letter was written in a sprawling hand:

Dear Mr. Dort:

As your name is the only one which I can recall who can help me, I am writing to offer you a business proposition. Presently, I am living in Castelonne, San Salvador, at the Copabonga Hotel, and am in possession of twenty-five thousand dollars which I borrowed without authority from funds belonging to someone else.

Unfortunately, I am extremely warm and uncomfortable, bored, and probably homesick. I would like to return to the United States. If I agree to return the money, can you arrange for the insurance, or bonding, company to drop charges. The insurance company involved is the NACI.

Sincerely,

Herman K. Berman

P.S. I should also mention my life has been threatened, and I'd appreciate your prompt attention

HKB

The plane landed on a field outside Castelonne. When it had bucked itself to a stop, Dort untangled his seat-belt, reassembled his nerves, and limped forth to locate a taxi to drive him into town. The assembly of adobe houses, plazas, and narrow streets which made up Castelonne pulsated in the afternoon sun, and was shrouded in a dry-mist of dust.

The taxi, a thirty-year-old Stearns-Knight, had determined on a gait similar to a canter on its two remaining cylinders, and it slid into a stop before the Copabonga Hotel like a Dodger sliding into third-base. The hotel was a two story structure with the second story projecting over the first to afford a balcony which completely encircled the building. When Dort registered at the desk, the clerk admitted, indifferently, that he hadn't seen Berman in four days. Berman's room number, however, was 217. This total amount of information cost Dort twelve pesos.

While the lock on the door of 217 was strong enough to withstand any sly drafts or idle breezes, it gave way before Dort's pocketknife in considerably less than

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thirty seconds. He sauntered into the room and looked around.

It was similar to the one he had been assigned. Square in shape, it contained a hammered brass bed, two horse-hair upholstered chairs, a wardrobe standing in one corner, and a large wooden ceiling fan which didn't work. A series of folding doors opened to the balcony. In the wardrobe was a leather suitcase, a pair of shoes, and two seersucker suits. A large number of books scattered around the room stood in short, irregular stacks and piles against the walls and beside the bed.

Dort's examination of the room was interrupted by a voice inquiring, from the door to the balcony, "Are you back, Hermie?" The voice spoke with a pronounced French accent, and its tone was unquestionably feminine.

Straightening up, Dort swung around to face an attractive, although weathered, red-headed woman. She was wrapped in a flaming red robe spotted with yellow butterflies. "No," Dort told her, "I'm not Hermie, and I'm not back. I just arrived." He closed the wardrobe door, while asking, "Where'd you come from?"

"Oh, I thought you were Hermie." The woman nodded toward the room to her right. "I have a room next door. I am—what you call—a friend of his."

"That makes it convenient," Dort commented. "When did you last see Hermie?"

She cocked her head and considered. "Not for four days." She stepped into the room. "Have you a cigarette?"

"Sure," said Dort. He lit one for her and passed it over.

"Are you planning to steal something?" she asked.

"No," Dort replied. "It's more in the order of repossessing." He regarded her thoughtfully. "Who're you?"

"My name is Mimi," she trilled, rolling her name in accents of French. "Mimi . . . St. Laurent . . . de Valliers." Dort nodded, and she continued, "I am an *artiste*. I sing in *le bristro* in the hotel."

"How long have you been here?"

Mimi paused, momentarily, before admitting, "Over three years."

"That's quite a run," Dort said. "What part of Iowa are you from?"

Mimi sat down in the chair, crossed her legs, and replied. "Not Iowa. Nebraska," She took a drag on the cigarette, and remarked, "Jeez . . . it's hot. I used to think Nebraska was hot in August, but you'd have to add two feet to a Nebraska thermometer to even get it to register in Castelonne."

"It must get hotter somewhere," Dort agreed, "but I can only think of one place." He started probing

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the mattress and pillow. "Why the French act?" he asked.

"Oh, the locals think it's great. 'Course they can't understand French, but they still think it's the most," Mimi replied wearily. Rising from the chair, she sauntered to the balcony. "I don't know what you're looking for, mister," she said, "but if it's dough you won't find it."

"Why not?" Dort asked.

"Because Hermie was the slowest man with a buck I ever saw." She turned away, "See you around." And walked down the balcony towards her own room.

Dort didn't find the money. He didn't find Herman K. Berman either. Although it came as no surprise to Dort that the citizens of San Salvador spoke Spanish, it did surprise him that most of them spoke what they insisted was English as well. Dort had little difficulty in asking questions, but he had great trouble in deciphering the answers. However, they all narrowed down to one point: no one in Castelonne had seen Berman in "it makes four days."

A realist to the ends of his square white teeth, Dort settled for a misture of rum and tequilla when he couldn't locate Scotch, Bourbon, Rye, Irish Whiskey, or Gin—in that order. He contemplated, without pleasure, his glass, glowering at the prospective loss of five thousand dollars.

He considered the situation with sweat dripping from his ears, which added little to his comfort. If, Dort thought, Professor Herman K. Berman had written to him urging him to hurry to San Salvador—then why wasn't Professor Herman K. Berman on hand to greet him when he arrived?"

The answer, Dort assured himself, would be found in one of two reasons. A., Berman *didn't* want to meet him, having possibly changed his mind about the deal or B.,Berman *couldn't* meet him, because if the threat in his letter had materialized, he might very well be dead.

Finishing his drink, Dort calculated that the elapsed time between the liquor sliding down his throat and gushing from his pores was a mere matter of six seconds. He walked across the plaza to the department of police, Captain Hernando Lorca in charge.

The captain's desk was at one end of a squad room which resembled a pool room with the tables removed. Racks at the walls held a number of ancient carbines, many of them with parts missing. In the waste-basket, by the captain's desk, a large cat with matted fur was nursing a litter of extremely small kittens. The cat looked suspiciously at Dort, but the kittens didn't.

Captain Lorca was a tall man, thin to the point of emaciation. His khaki tunic hung loosely from

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his gaunt frame, and seemed wired to his skeleton by means of a Sam Browne belt drawn as tightly as a corset.

Lorca looked up from behind his desk and said, "Mr. Dort, I've been waiting for you to appear." He stood up, extended a thin hand and pumped Dort's large one, then promptly reseated himself. Dort was left standing in front of the desk.

"What do you mean you were waiting for me?" asked Dort.

Lorca quickly pasted a wide white smile across his dentures. "Everybody in Castelonne shows up here sooner of later."

"You knew I was coming?"

"Certainly," Lorca agreed pleasantly. "I know everything that happens in Castelonne." He made an attempt to look modest; it failed, so he shrugged instead. "It's my business."

"Do you mind if I sit on your desk?" asked Dort. He slipped a leg easily over one end of the scarred piece, and haunched against it comfortably. Folding his arms, Dort looked down at Captain Lorca. Captain Lorca looked back and waited.

"Mind if I smoke?" Lorca inquired politely while lighting a cigarette.

"Not at all. I'll join you," said Dort, lighting one too. For some time, both men sat with their own thoughts. This, Dort finally told himself, could continue right through the rainy season. He shook himself mentally, and kicked the conversation back to life again.

"Are you acquainted with an American named Professor Herman K. Berman?" he asked.

"Si—I mean, yes." Lorca quickly corrected his impeccable English. "Senor Berman is an American embezzler who absconded with twenty-five thousand dollars from his college." After a slight pause, he added, "He has been in Castelonne for three months."

"You mean to tell me you knew this guy was a crook," Dort demanded indignantly, "and you've sat here and done nothing about it?"

"Mr. Dort," Lorca explained softly, "you misunderstand. Consider it from my point of view. First, it was not my money, and it did not belong to anyone from my country. However, that money distributed among the merchants of Castelonne might have induced a slight economic boom."

Then, as if addressing a backward tourist, he added, "You must realize we have practically no tourist trade here."

"I can understand that," Dort said grimly, and mopped the back of his neck.

"However," Captain Lorca continued, "after three months I can find no indication that Professor Berman spent—what do you call it?—an easy buck." He shrugged.

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"So we have all been disappointed."

"Yeah," agreed Dort, "that must really have been a bitter blow to your local chamber of commerce. But didn't you know there was a reward out for Berman? A thousand dollars!"

Lorca nodded patiently. "It came to my attention. You must realize, however, that my immediate superior, Colonel Gomez, owns a large pig farm two kilometers east of Castelonne. The piggery has not prospered." Lorca looked both sad and thoughtful.

"Why not?"

"For one thing, the peons—they will not work hard. They spend their time in the mountains."

"There's a reason for that, too?" said Dort.

"Yes. Colonel Gomez's superior is General Juan O'Brien who has recently invested—disastrously—in a Ford tractor agency. The peons insist on stealing all the tractor wheels."

"Why do they steal the wheels?" Dort asked. He didn't want to inquire, but a strong compulsion charged him.

"They bring the wheels down here to sell for scrap iron." After a pause, Lorca added, "It is a very lucrative racket for the natives. The general is compelled to buy back the wheels at retail prices." Lorca shrugged dismally. "Soon the general will go broke—*pfhttt.*"

Dort shook his head as if to clear it. "What's all this leading to?"

"Only an explanation why I did not arrest Professor Berman and attempt to collect the reward." Lorca pursed his lips reflectively. "With Senors Gomez and O'Brien both desperately needing money—and both outranking me—" It was not necessary for him to finish the statement.

"I can see what you mean," Dort said. "They'd get to the till first."

Lorca ignored Dort's comment, as he continued slowly, "On the other hand, as a licensed investigator, you are legally entitled to twenty percent of the stolen money—if you can find it and return it to the bonding company."

Dort began to feel uneasy. He gazed at the ceiling for a moment. Then he swung his leg lightly against the desk and admitted reluctantly, "Yeah."

"So, if I offer you the facilities of my official and efficient organization . . ." Lorca looked inquiringly at Dort.

"Sure, sure," said Dort, remembering Peterson's bitter words about half the loaf. "We split my commission fifty-fifty. That way your pals, the Rover Boys, can't get their mitts on it."

"I accept your generaous offer," Lorca assured him promptly. "Now what can I do to cooperate, Mr. Dort?"

"Change the weather!" Dort

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snapped. He walked to the door of the guard room. Pausing, he added, "While you're looking for Berman, I'll keep looking for the dough." He left.

At eleven o'clock that night, although it was no cooler, it was considerably darker. Dort sat in the cafe of the Copabonga and watched the wooden fans whirling in the ceilings. The fans did nothing to stir up a breeze, but they mixed efficiently the cigarette smoke with the limp supply of oxygen already trapped in the room.

The long, irregular-shaped room was illuminated at intervals by pink, rose-shaped, silk lampshades clamped to yellowly gleaming lights. The room was hot, dark, and noisy as was the band—a group of three musicians who played guitar, concertina, and wood blocks.

Seated at a table next to Dort was a huge, big-bellied man with the appealing look of a crocodile. With him was Mimi and a dark-haired girl named Ynez. Ynez watched the man with disapproval as he kept up a rapid conversation with Mimi and at the end of each sentence, punctuated his comments with a pinch to one, or both, of Mimi's well-rounded knees.

Their conversation was in Spanish, and although Dort could not follow it, he learned that the giant's name was Pablo. Mimi's and Pablo's enjoyment of each other's conversation seemed to grow in direct ratio to Ynez's disapproval.

Ynez, looking darkly around the room, let her glance fall upon Dort. Dort lifted his glass and nodded. Ynez turned her glance indignantly away, then reconsidering, looked back and smiled.

Dort rose from his table and approached her. "May I have this dance?" he asked.

Before Ynez could reply, Mimi interrupted. "There's no music," she said.

"That's all right," said Dort, "we can pretend it's Make-believe Ballroom."

"Besides," added Mimi, "she doesn't speak English."

"The hell I don't," said Ynez.

Pablo regarded Dort obliquely through slate-brown eyes, and spoke rapidly to Mimi. She shrugged and turned to Dort. "He doesn't like you intruding." When Dort made no reply, she continued, "I'll give you a piece of advice. Pablo is tough—plenty."

"I'm not," Dort told her, sighing and sinking into an empty chair. "I'm scared to death." He cupped his chin in a hand and turned to Ynez.

"Beat it," Mimi told him, "you're asking for trouble."

Dort felt a small, warm, feminine hand snuggle into his beneath the table. It came from the direction of Ynez, lingered for a moment, and then hastily withdrew.

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Dort, rose, stretched, yawned, and hitched up his belt.

"I just wanted to hear you sing," he told Mimi, "but I guess I'll go to bed. In room two twenty-two." He went upstairs.

Dort beat Ynez to his room with six minutes to spare. She slipped quickly inside when he opened the door. Grasping him secretively by the arm, she asked in a whisper, "You are an American agent, are you not?"

"Right," said Dort, "I belong to the FBI, Military Intelligence, CIA, as well as being a Treasury man, and a Secret Service operative. Furthermore—this is top-level—I'm a B.P.O.E. with three horns."

"Ahhhh." Ynez looked around the room suspiciously, then remarked, somewhat loudly. "That Mimi!" The words sounded like ice-water dropped on a hot skillet.

"What about her?" asked Dort. "You promise to me, you make no trouble to Pablo, I tell you something verrrry interesting."

Dort nodded.

"I love Pablo." Ynez' tragic eyes burned brightly as the full current of her love hit her. She rolled them upwards. "But that Mimi—she cause trouble. Very much trouble."

"How?"

"She has no refined nature, that Mimi. She flirt and chase men. She try to get Senor Berman, the Americano, to give her money. He don't do so." Momentarily, Ynez looked triumphant as the memory of Berman's business acumen. "Mimi—she get mad. She tell Pablo to take money away from Senor Berman."

Dort poured a glass of warm water from a pitcher and drank it thirstily. "Well, did he?" he asked, wiping his mouth.

"No, but Pablo try. Senor Berman refuse to give up money. Then Pablo he get mad, too, and—you must believe me, Senor, Pablo does not mean it—he threaten to place knife in Senor Berman." She added angrily, "and all on account of that Mimi!"

"Maybe Pablo didn't mean it, but I can understand Berman thinking maybe he might," Dort observed judiciously. "What happened next?"

"Nothing. Senor Berman write letter to you."

"How do you know that?" Dort asked sharply.

"Everybody know that," Ynez informed him, simply. "Then Senor Berman disappear."

"Did Pablo snatch him?"

"Que? I mean, I do not understand."

"Did Pablo catch him—hold him?"

"Oh, no. Pablo can not find him. Then that Mimi, she start trying to get my Pablo to give her money."

"Well, don't worry," said Dort. "I'll have a talk with Mimi. Then I'll arrest her, and take her back in

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irons to Sing Sing. When she has gray hair, I'll send you a lock."

"That would be nice," Ynez assured him seriously, and left.

At five o'clock in the morning, the dawn streaked the sky above Castelonne. The last three-year-old baby had been yanked off the streets; the goats, burros, and dogs had given their final bleat, bray, and bark and had been thoroughly thrashed by their owners. All the denizens went to bed. Dort, however, got out of bed and, pulling on shirt and trousers, stalked through the hall to room 217 where he knocked at Mimi's door.

Mimi answered it leisurely, wrapped in the familiar red and yellow wrapper. Mascara smudged her eyes until they looked not only misshaped but also misplaced. Her voice was hoarse from the hours of conversation in the bistro, and she had put her hair up in curlers.

Dort bowed and said, "You've never looked lovelier, M'amselle."

"Drop dead," snapped Mimi. "But don't do it here. Wait until you get further down the hall."

Dort inserted a size-twelve shoe between the door and its frame, and asked conversationally, "What's this I hear about you putting Pablo up to slitting the good professor's gullet?"

"Oh, that," said Mimi pushing hard against the door in a vain attempt to close it. "Think nothing of it."

"Well, I might overlook it," Dort replied calmly, "if my own curiosity was less burning. C'mon, tell me. Did Pablo slit it for Berman?"

Giving up the attempt to close the door, Mimi shrugged and walked back into the room. Dort followed her and looked around. It differed from Berman's room only by the addition of an old-fashioned dressing table with side mirrors. The table was covered with creams, lotions, bleaches, tanning preparations, colognes, perfumes, powders, pomades, and sundry other items.

"No," Mimi told Dort. "Pablo threatened to, all right. Then that cheap-skate Berman wrote you a letter and hightailed into nowhere." She added, musingly, "I still wonder what he did with that dough? I coulda used it."

"Did you have something special in mind to do with it?" asked Dort.

"Sure," Mimi answered promptly, "to get the hell out of this hole." She began to mix a skin oil into her face, counting the strokes of her fingers under her breath, while she continued talking. "I want to go back, get to New York. I want new clothes—plenty of 'em—and a nice place to live with lots of air-conditioning." Pausing, she regarded herself critically in the mirror. "Maybe also hire a good publicity man."

"Did you consider the possibility that Berman might resent hav-

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ing Pablo carve him up?" asked Dort.

Mimi, failing to find words to express new opinions of the missing professor, stated finally, "It'd serve him right."

"Why?"

"Look," Mimi said, assuming a sweet reasonableness of tone, "the prof was down here for three months. He didn't know anybody, see anybody, or talk to anybody. He just sort of walked around and looked hot—or else he read books. Then every night, every single night, he'd come to the cafe and sit and wait for me. I'd talk to him all night long." She shrugged. "I'm not growing any younger. Now and then I'd hint maybe a girl like me would like a little present, even maybe a little money. He'd ignore my suggestions."

"Maybe he was stupid," suggested Dort.

"Stupid like a banker!" snapped Mimi. "So then he began to get restless. I could sort of tell he was planning to go away. He was a miserable speciman all right, but he was the best chance I had to get out of this dive. He didn't offer to take me with him, or give me get-away dough."

"How'd you find out Berman was loaded with dough?"

"One day I looked through his suitcase, and read all the newspaper clippings." Mimi scooped up a wad of face cream on her fingers, and remarked, "I don't think this estogen stuff works." She rubbed it in anyway.

"I am listening to your story," Dort reminded her.

"Oh. Well, next I tried to cook up something with Pablo. He don't look like much, but he's pretty rich for this place. He made all his dough just being a plain crook. He's louse enough to go for a fast deal. Pablo and I agreed to split Hermie's dough."

As she turned back to the mirror, her eyes rose to two volumes of books stacked carelessly on top of the wardrobe. Motioning to the books, she said to Dort, "There's the result of the prof's generosity —for three solid months of my time."

Dort wandered closer to examine the two volumes. He stood by the wardrobe and looked up to where they were resting. Their titles read:

TITI LVCRETI CARI
DE RERVM NATVRA
Libri Sex

He reached up and removed one of the volumes. The pages were uncut. "Yeah, I know," Mimi observed, "I thought the same thing. I saw those lousy books in his room and that 'Libri Sex' threw me. I got the idea maybe they were sex books." After a furious pause, she asked, "Do you want to know what that means? It means 'six volumes' in Latin." She added, "Anyway, it's all about some jerk

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named Lucretius, and I couldn't care less!"

Dort placed the volume on the dressing table and turned to leave. Before he reaced the door, however, it opened inward with a tremendous thrust and Pablo heaved his bulk belligerently into the room. While glaring at Dort, he spoke rapidly to Mimi.

Mimi smiled modestly, batted her eyes, and said to Dort, "Isn't Pablo a dear? He's very angry—and very jealous of you! He thinks we've . . ." She permitted her voice to trail a way delicately.

"Tell the ape to go out and pick cotton," Dort replied as he attempted to circumnavigate Pablo's bulk.

Pablo moved with surprising quickness for a man of his size, and Dort continued to find Pablo between himself and the door.

Dort said to Mimi, "Please tell him it's too early in the morning."

"He won't believe me," Mimi explained.

Pablo clenched his teeth, slitted his eyes, and growled menacingly in his throat. It was an impressive performance. Dort realized that as he spoiled the effect, somewhat, by hitting Pablo in the belly. Pablo inhaled deeply, sharply, then swung a huge fist that caught Dort on the side of the head and knocked him half way across the room.

Mimi, watching curiously, found the courtesy to observe the formalities and protest weakly. "I wish you boys wouldn't fight over me."

"So do I," agreed Dort, and went back to work.

He became quite strenuously occupied with Pablo. He became distracted after a moment, however, by sounds of an extremely high frequency. The sounds seemed to originate in the room and, by mutual consent, he and Pablo discontinued their own activities to watch and listen. Ynez had entered into a discussion with Mimi.

Standing with hands on their hips, the two girls carried on a conversation pitched to the top of their voices—a conversation which seemed to consist mostly of undesirable words in English, French, and Spanish. Other guests of the Copabonga, drawn to the scene of the discussion, lingered in the hall and lined the balcony, shouting words of encouragement.

Mimi, realizing her voice was giving out, retreated slowly to her dressing table to collect additional ammunition. She scooped up a volume of Lucretius and hurled the heavy book through the air. It missed Ynez by several feet and slamming into the wall, bounced back to the floor. The heavy cover flew open and pages, twisted and torn during the flight, disgorged hundred-dollar bills around the room.

All action, all sound ceased as

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a score of assorted sets of eyes followed the gently floating bills. Then a voice announced, "I will take charge of the books!" Captain Lorca, followed by two police in khaki uniforms carrying short carbines, entered the room.

AT SIX O'CLOCK in the morning, it was growing hot again in Castelonne. Dort, Mimi, Pablo and Ynez were gathered in Captain Lorca's office. During the exchange of protests, denials, charges and counter-charges, Lorca had continued to cut the pages of the two volumes of Lucretius and remove hundred-dollar bills.

Dort stood, with folded arms, and mentally kept count with Lorca. The captain having removed the last bill from the last page, stood and regarded the prisoners.

"How much money do you have for bail?" he inquired. Amidst protests from Pablo and tears from Mimi and Ynez, they pooled twenty dollars in American money, thirty in Mexican, and forty one in San Salvador pesos.

"That comes out exactly right," Lorca announced calmly. He put the money in his desk drawer, and dismissed the prisoners. Turning to Dort, who had paid no bail, the captain continued, "You will undoubtedly wish to return to the United States on the first plane." He pushed a large document across his desk to Dort. "You will please sign, here."

The document, printed in Spanish, was a mystery to Dort. "What in hell are these for?" he asked.

"Formalities," Lorca replied casually.

"If I don't sign it?" asked Dort.

"You don't leave San Salvador," explained Lorca.

Dort signed the document, and turned to leave the guardroom.

Lorca remained behind his desk where he had two stacks of bills. In one pile were twenty-five century notes. Lorca picked the entire pile up, edged it carefully, then tucked it in his tunic. The balance of the money, twenty-two thousand, five hundred dollars, he shoved toward Dort.

"Don't forget to take the money," Lorca said.

Dort turned and regarded the captain in amazement. "I figured it was a contribution to a pig farm, and tractor agency," he said.

"Under no circumstances!" Lorca replied rather coldly.

Dort scooped up the bills and distributed them throughout his pockets. Then he said to the captain, "I still don't get it. You could keep it all."

Lorca, reminded of the large sum of money, sighed regretfully, but shook his head. "You forget Colonel Gomez, and General O'Brien," he said. "They would get it." Lorca patted his tunic where the smaller stack nestled. "This—which you have given me —they cannot touch."

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"Okay," said Dort. "But if it's all the same to you, I think I'll go now."

"You are free to leave anytime you wish," Lorca assured him politely. "But do you not wish to speak to Professor Berman first?"

Dort, who had nearly reached the door, stopped, abruptly. Going a little pale he turned by degrees to face Lorca again. "You've got him *here?*"

"Four days—five now." Lorca added, "Cell nine."

"Why didn't you tell me?" demanded Dort.

"You didn't ask me," Lorca replied reasonably. He carefully rearranged his desk calendar, note book, and small vase of flowers. "Professor Berman has been inquiring for you."

"My God!" breathed Dort.

"But he has not been a particularly cooperative prisoner," Lorca said, shaking his head gently. "After I read his letter to you, I inquired of him regarding the money. Naturally, he denied any knowledge of it."

Lorca shifted slightly to escape a ray of brassy sunlight which was stealthily creeping toward his chair. "However, it seemed reasonable to assume that if you arrived, Senor Dort, you would find the money."

"I get it," Dort said, his face emotionless, "you let me do all the leg work."

Slowly the pieces began to fall into place, and he continued more rapidly, "As a matter of fact, you didn't want Berman to turn over the dough to you, because if he did you could have collected only the reward money and Gomez and O'Brien would have grabbed that!" Lorca lighted a cigarette and listened politely. "So you waited and made a private deal with me. You held on to Berman, telling yourself that I would *have* to find the money, and cut you in on my percentage."

Dort stumped out his own cigarette and began to grin—a wolfish, hungry expression. "You know, Lorca," he admitted, "I'd have done the same to J. J. Peterson, myself." Dort began to laugh.

Captain Lorca joined him politely.

J. J. PETERSON SAID, "All right, here's the receipt for the twenty thousand." He pushed the slip of paper across the desk. "Incidently," he added, "when does Berman expect to return to this country?"

"The Professor can come back any time he wants, I guess," said Dort. "But I think maybe he's going to stay awhile in San Salvador."

"Why?" asked Peterson.

"He's got a new job working for a guy named Lorca. Lorca needs smart guys," Dort explained. "He's trying to build a brain trust."

"What for?" asked Peterson.

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"By the way, is the air-conditioner too cold for you?"

"It'll never be too cold again," Dort said. "But getting back to Lorca, I've got a hunch he's bucking to replace a colonel." After a pause, he added, "And I think he's just about got it made."

"Won't the colonel cause trouble?" J. J. Peterson began to unwrap a cigar.

"Frankly," replied Dort, "it isn't the colonel who's going to cause any trouble. It is the general."

"I don't get you," said Peterson.

"It's this way," explained Dort. "The general is going to be awful damned mad if he ever finds out that Lorca owns the junk yard which buys up all his stolen tractor wheels."

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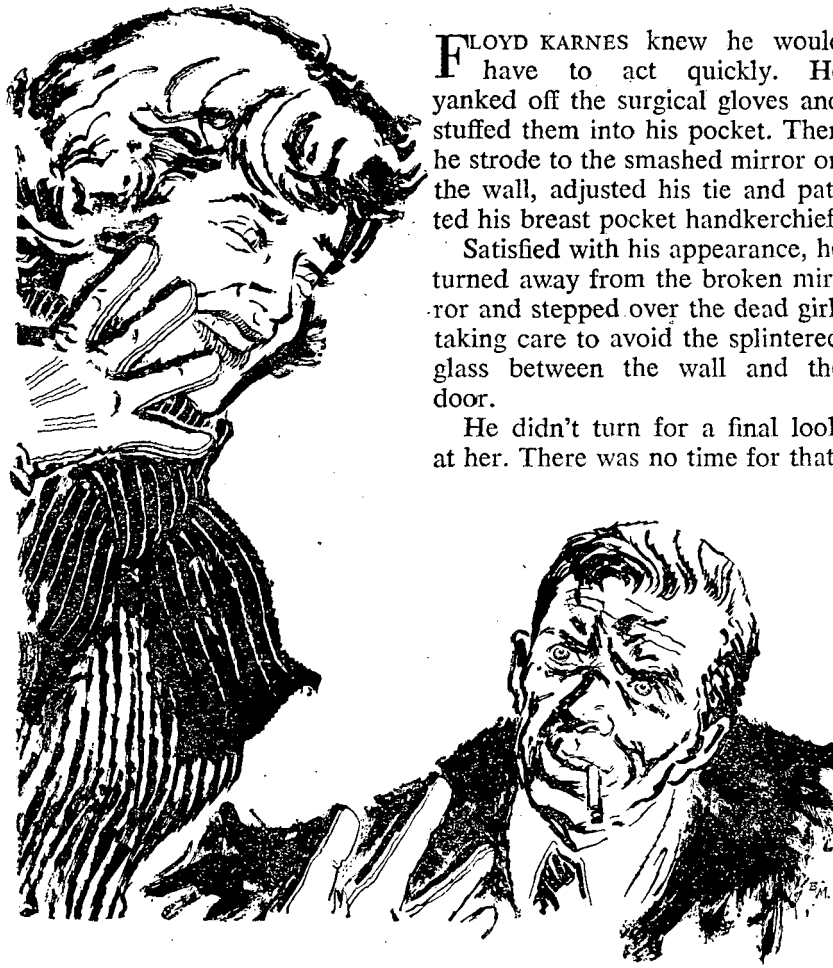
MURDER . . . AS IN A GLASS DARKLY

by ART CROCKETT



FLOYD KARNES knew he would have to act quickly. He yanked off the surgical gloves and stuffed them into his pocket. Then he strode to the smashed mirror on the wall, adjusted his tie and patted his breast pocket handkerchief.

Satisfied with his appearance, he turned away from the broken mirror and stepped over the dead girl, taking care to avoid the splintered glass between the wall and the door.

He didn't turn for a final look at her. There was no time for that.

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He had to get out of the building in a hurry. In all probability the crash of glass had been heard by the other tenants, and the more curious of them would lose no time in investigating.

Cautiously, Floyd opened the door a crack. He listened. The hall was quiet. He slipped out of the apartment, closed the door firmly behind him and made his way to the building's self-service elevator.

He was conscious now of the sweat that drenched his body. His shirt was glued to his skin and there was a coldness at the base of his spine.

It was always like that after a killing. The knowledge that he had successfully killed before didn't make the job any easier, especially when his victim was a girl—an extremely pretty girl like Linda Barton.

And now, on this particular job, there was something else for him to worry about.

He'd experienced it first while listening at the door. A light-headedness, a sudden weakening of physical power. It was alarming, inexplicable. He was even more acutely aware of it now as he stood at the elevator shaft and pressed the down button.

He shrugged the feeling off. He waited a few seconds, then pressed the button again. Standing in the hall, in full view of anyone who might open a door, was maddening. He smashed his fist into the palm of his hand.

Where was that elevator cab?

With a determined effort of will he reminded himself that the only important thing to think about right now was to get to his car. Purposely, he'd parked it ten blocks away. A necessary precaution. Why give any casual onlooker something to remember when the story of the killing was out?

But Floyd wasn't in the car yet. In fact, he wasn't even out of the building. He was far from being in the clear. Panic rose in him as he tried desperately to steel himself against the prospect of the unexpected.

If anyone knew the risks involved in the business of murder, Floyd Karnes knew them. Floyd was a professional. But repetition was no guarantee that he would ever acquire an aloof indifference to the act. He trembled now as violently as he had on his first job. His body shook as if an icy blast of wind was whipping his bared back mercilessly.

Dozens of times in the past he'd known the creepy feeling that dogged him after a job was done. And he knew that until a full month had blurred the vivid scene, he'd re-live hour by hour, day by day, everything that happened in Linda's apartment.

The elevator had arrived at his floor. It was empty. Floyd was grateful for that. He stepped into

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the cage and ran his shaking finger down the row of black buttons. He stopped at the one marked M. Main floor. *M is also for murder.*

The elevator cage descended slowly. Ordinarily, Floyd suffered no sensation in elevator cages. But now the dizziness was back. He closed his eyes, searched for a reason. He pressed his cold palm against his forehead. There was no fever. At least, none that he could detect. And he wasn't ill. He straightened, pressed tightly against the back wall of the descending cage, telling himself that what he needed was a good sleep.

Now his thoughts raced back to each little gesture he made in Linda Barton's apartment. He wondered if he'd left any damaging evidence lying about. She'd fought hard. She could have ripped something from him—a button perhaps. Or maybe some small object had fallen out of his pocket and passed unnoticed.

He shook his fogged head. The mere act of thinking was strangely difficult for him. He tried to clear away the mishmash of unrelated thoughts that plagued him. With effort he could remember entering her apartment. He remembered how her knees had buckled when she'd seen the surgical gloves on his hands.

A scream caught in her throat, froze there. Suddenly, the girl straightened, seemed to draw on an inner courage. She glared at the intruder. "Who are you? What do you want?"

Floyd advanced on her. "You blabbed to the Grand Jury, kid. What did you expect? A good pal of yours is paying plenty for this."

He didn't know the whole story. He wasn't supposed to know it. He was told simply that Linda Barton was the property of a big name —a name big enough to push the threat of war off the front pages.

According to Floyd's informant, Linda Barton's big trouble centered around her pretty mouth. Big Name wanted it shut, forever.

Now, Linda circled Floyd and managed to keep furniture between them. He made no noisy attempt to go after her. Instead, he waited patiently for his opportunity to strike. He leaned his tall frame against a huge wall mirror and snapped his surgical gloves menacingly.

"You can run all day, baby. But you'd better accept it. There's no other way."

The girl stood at a coffee table. A heavy glass ashtray caught her eye. She picked it up, held it above her head. "I don't know who you are, mister. But I think you're bluffing. I'm supposed to be scared, right? This is an object lesson. I'll bet on it."

She was breathing heavily. Her face broke into an uncertain smile. Confidence was ebbing from her and Floyd noticed it. She said, "If you take one more step I'm going

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to throw this thing and then scream my head off."

Floyd accepted the challenge. He took a step forward. The ash-tray shot through the air. Floyd ducked. He heard it smash into the mirror behind him and felt the spray of glass that spewed out like shrapnel.

Before Linda could release the scream she threatened, Floyd's strong hands closed around her throat. . . .

He stepped out of the elevator cab on the main floor and stood for a moment surveying the lobby. Sunlight poured through heavy glass doors. He pushed through them and headed for the busy avenue.

His body still trembled; he was still sweating. He'd take a shower when he got home, he promised himself. Then he'd crawl into bed for a few hours' sleep.

At the busy corner he turned left, headed North. Parking his car ten blocks away was a shrewd move. People had an annoying way of remembering a little thing like a man climbing into a parked car. Evidence like that could be damaging.

Busy shoppers on the avenue jostled against him and hurried on without apology. He kept pace with them, acted the part of one who was also interested in what the shop windows had to offer.

He stopped at a clothing store, appraised the styles shown in the window, then casually moved on to the next window. . . .

At the next corner he joined a small group of sidewalk engineers intently concerned with the repaving of a side street. Floyd didn't particularly care for the scene, and for some frightening reason he wasn't at all sure why he stopped. The noise of the steam roller pierced his ears and for an uncomfortable moment he suffered another dizzy spell.

When the traffic light changed he was swept along with the crowd. But now he couldn't keep pace with them. He lagged behind. His legs felt as though they were apart from him.

At the next corner he stopped and waited for the traffic light to change. Two policemen stood near him, engrossed in their own conversation. Floyd figured he could dart across on red, but that would be foolish. Cops were giving people tickets for jaywalking. It'd be just his luck—

He stared at the red light. It grew dim. He snapped his eyes shut and opened them quickly. Now the light was a vague blur. And that damnable dizziness was back again, stronger than ever.

He shook his head to clear it. What was happening? His brain groped for an answer. There had to be one. Floyd was healthy. He was young and strong and kept himself in top condition. Why

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should something like this happen when—

A voice behind him cut into his thoughts. "Say, mister, you feel okay?"

Floyd turned and faced the policemen. Fear balled up in his stomach, pushed into his throat, gagged him. The policemen were pointing to the sidewalk. "Look."

On the concrete at Floyd's feet were spatterings of fresh blood.

"That's yours, mister. It's your neck. Bleeding like hell. Didn't you know it?"

Floyd's hand tested the back of his neck. He pulled it away and stared stupidly at his blood-stained fingers.

"How'd it happen, buddy? Where were you?"

His mouth dried up. He couldn't speak. He wasn't sure what he could say even if he found his voice. His head spun crazily. He was aware of curious onlookers, but couldn't see them.

One of the policemen said, "Grab a cab and take him to a hospital. I'll see if I can find out where he's been. Gotta check it out. Somebody else might be worse off."

Floyd felt himself being lifted into a cab. For a fleeting second his blurred vision took in the cab's rear view mirror. Then he remembered another mirror, a much larger one. Linda had tossed an ashtray and it had broken the mirror and bits of glass had sprayed out over him.

He'd been cut!

And all along he thought the moisture on the back of his neck was sweat.

The policeman in the cab with Floyd yelled to his partner, "How you gonna check it out, Pete? This guy's practically out. You'll never find out where he was."

The other policeman chuckled. "It's a cinch. All I have to do is follow his blood trail. . . ."

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